

“America and the World – 2017 and Beyond”  
Lecture by Lincoln Bloomfield Jr. at the  
David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, Brigham Young University  
November 2, 2016

Thank you for the honor of speaking to you today – my first visit to Brigham Young University. People with diplomatic titles are expected to know how to handle all situations without committing a “faux pas.” So let me caution you that I am not a career diplomat, but rather a centrist internationalist who was appointed to all of my policy positions throughout my career.

As one whose upbringing was shaped in part by the rather unstructured and non-theological view of organized religion within a small New England Unitarian parish, I probably should not begin by quoting a theologian, particularly one who was neither Unitarian nor Mormon.

But I recently read the 1952 essay entitled "The Irony of American History" by the philosopher-theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and found his caution about policymakers falling prey to moral and ethical delusions in the international pursuit of noble objectives to be relevant and still useful two generations later.

"Now," Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1952, "we are immersed in world-wide responsibilities; and our weakness has grown into strength. Our culture knows little of the use and the abuse of power; but we have to use power in global terms. Our idealists are divided between those who would renounce the responsibilities of power for the sake of preserving the purity of our soul and those who are ready to cover every ambiguity of good and evil in our actions by the frantic insistence that any measure taken in a good cause must be unequivocally virtuous." He warned that although America must take what he called "morally hazardous actions to preserve our civilization" and "we must exercise our power," there is a danger of "moral complacency about the relation of dubious means to supposedly good ends."

These words could just as easily have been written today, looking back at the controversial 2003 US military intervention of Iraq and its chaotic, violent aftermath. It seems clear that the shock of the 9/11 attacks in 2001 had a profound impact on senior decisionmakers' perceptions of the moral hazards involved in responding to Al Qaeda's attack with the forcible removal of regimes in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 1952, Niebuhr was mainly concerned about the nuclear arms race, and what he termed the "monstrous consequences" of this moral complacency which at that time were exemplified by the Soviet Union, a totalitarian state whose brutal nature was entirely at odds with its utopian ideology.

In the intervening decades, we have seen versions of the American idealists described by Niebuhr, people who question the virtuous nature of American power and prefer not to see America exert its will in the world.

The spectacle of Americans and their Vietnamese allies fleeing Saigon in 1975 after more than a decade of war had a deep and lasting effect on the national appetite for strategic risk. The seizure of the American Embassy and hostage crisis in Tehran in 1979, as well as the horrific bombings, hostage takings and other acts of terror in Lebanon during the 1980s caused many to ask why the United States was the target of so much hatred and aggression.

After the high drama of the Gulf War in 1991, American voters turned President George H.W. Bush out of office in favor of a new generation of political leaders, led by President Clinton and Vice President Gore, who had vowed to turn attention and resources inward to focus on the US economy and domestic concerns. Candidate Barack Obama did much the same in 2009 after nearly a decade of costly and indecisive military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq under Republican stewardship.

So we have had our share of idealists who fear that America is morally compromised by the ambitious pursuit of influence in the world.

At the other end of the idealist spectrum we have also seen those who find no fault in America's unabashed exercise of superpower influence. For example, following the collapse of the Soviet state in 1990, we saw neoconservative claims that history had ended and the United States now stood unchallenged in the world. The theme that America should never have to apologize for seeking to lead in the world has been a durable theme on the political right.

Yet with both sides of the idealist spectrum, reality always seems to intervene and temper such absolutist views. In the case of the neoconservatives at the end of the Cold War, as we saw, the so-called "unipolar moment" was very short-lived, if it ever existed.

What is striking about politics today is that neither of these extremes – a pullback from active involvement in international security challenges, or a posture of assertive unilateralism – has a champion. What we find in the electoral process, six days before the 2016 election, are hybrid postures reflected in both the Trump and Clinton candidacies.

Let me try to describe what I see in the two major candidates for President, hopefully in a non-partisan manner. Donald Trump's bid for office is unlike almost any presidential candidacy in my memory. Mr. Trump appears to measure status by wealth and celebrity, rather than reputation. His *modus operandi* is to try and assert superiority over people who stand in the way of his goals, often by demonizing, diminishing and, he hopes, intimidating them. This behavior is more common with high-profile private equity investors, who operate in situations where one side's gain is the other side's loss.

In the private sector, protagonists are not speaking for entire populations; there is no thought of the symbolism involved in honoring one's opponent or ensuring he or she

saves face. The decorum and subtlety of political speech in Washington likely appears to Mr. Trump as vacillation and weakness.

I have three points of analysis about the Trump candidacy. First is the observation that this zero-sum approach to every private sector negotiation is culturally incompatible with the way victories are won in the Washington political arena. Yes, there are times when overwhelming power can intimidate others into falling in line. But even then, exercising decisive power is best done with magnanimity and grace, not by degrading people whose support will be vital to a leader's long-term success.

My second observation is that Mr. Trump does not appear to have made much effort to prepare for the job should he be elected. While he has issued policy positions, I see no evidence that he has given serious thought to how he would fill 6,000 politically-appointed positions, including the leadership of 440 federal agencies and departments. Despite his image as the head of a large business empire, cultivated on his television show, he does not display the steady executive mindset of one preparing to lead 2.8 million civilian employees and over 2 million military personnel. Instead we have seen more of a lone-wolf personality who prefers to rely on his own instincts and seeks advice from very few people.

These first two observations suggest, and indeed I believe, that a Trump presidency would be impaired by his unreadiness to govern and his inability to move the levers of influence inside the Washington beltway.

However, my third observation relates to the very significant portion of American voters who have responded favorably to Donald Trump's sharply worded and often divisive message of change. This is the most important, and underappreciated, aspect of the Trump campaign. He has said and done at least a dozen things considered offensive that almost any veteran of politics in America would regard as disqualifying for the highest office. Some think this is Mr. Trump's calculated way of dominating the news cycle; others wonder if he seeks the notoriety but would actually prefer to lose this election and continue in business as a major media personality.

I do not know if Donald Trump ran this race hoping to become President or as a way to revive his celebrity and the Trump business brand. But a stunningly large constituency has cheered his defiance of Washington, its political class, its campaign traditions and its media correspondents, and these people have decided that Donald Trump is their best hope of upending a status quo that they find intolerable.

In particular, Trump's elevation of the terms of trade and corporate outsourcing of manufacturing jobs, and his critiques of the health insurance law and tax liability issues, have touched on a major reservoir of popular discontent in America, one with which Bernie Sanders also connected very strongly. If Trump wins, this will be America's Brexit – a true black swan event where the political class in Washington completely misread the temper of the American people.

This brings me to Hillary Clinton's candidacy. She is, in many ways, the opposite of Donald Trump. She is a woman, which brings an entirely different sensibility to her approach to politics. She is not a person who seeks to assert dominance in her public interactions. She has a considerable reservoir of knowledge about government and public policy. She is supported by a large coterie of loyal policy and political colleagues, developed over many years, who are ready and willing to assume government positions if she becomes President.

If one could set aside any thoughts about Donald Trump for a moment, it would not seem unreasonable to examine Mrs. Clinton's management acumen and geopolitical aptitude more critically. Her reputation of being more hawkish than President Obama would be weighed against her diminished enthusiasm for ventures, once launched, in Iraq and Libya, and her apparent willingness in 2011 to accommodate President Obama's decision not to get involved in serious conflict resolution efforts as Syria imploded. The challenge from an opponent in Donald Trump who is unschooled in foreign policy has inhibited debate about Hillary Clinton's own core philosophy and record on war and peace issues.

The subject that does dominate public discussion of Hillary Clinton is her apparently less than ironclad commitment to the ethical standards to which our government's public servants have long been upheld. One would think that whoever wins next Tuesday, there is likely to be a renewed emphasis on safeguarding the public interest.

A Trump Presidency, I predict, would begin with a flourish of bold promises inspired by the hubris of an unexpected victory. But if a President-elect Trump demands support throughout Washington to build an expensive wall on the lengthy southern border, to impose large import tariffs on automotive manufacturers who relocated manufacturing facilities to Mexico, to withdraw support from NATO democracies who decline to appropriate substantially more budget funds for defense, to resume CIA use of waterboarding techniques on terror suspects, to divert military funds from conventional forces to invest more in the nuclear arsenal, and to open protected federal lands for oil and gas exploration, I predict that the Washington bureaucracy, Congress and the media, along with foreign allies, will rise up like the body's immune system to reject or at least inhibit policies it cannot support.

The image I have is of a frustrated and ineffective President trapped in the White House, not the all-powerful authoritarian some have projected. With major powers such as China and Russia, a President Trump might well cultivate a veneer of collegial summitry with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, but the underlying sanctions, trade and military policies would not fundamentally change. Mr. Trump's impact, in other words, would be cosmetic, not radical. In sum, while the Trump campaign has been enigmatic, a Trump Presidency would be more predictable.

With Hillary Clinton, the very opposite is true. Her campaign has been a traditional one, with many mainstream policy positions designed to demonstrate sensitivity to voters' chief concerns about the economy, discrimination and future opportunities, and other

issues. The Clinton campaign has skillfully appealed to segments of the voting public whose support she needs most to win.

But while Trump glided to the Republican nomination with surprising ease, gaining by some estimates more than \$2 billion in free media, Hillary Clinton's road to the nomination and the general election has been anything but easy. In order to placate the passionate supporters of Bernie Sanders and gain the energetic support of Senator Elizabeth Warren, Mrs. Clinton has had to pledge that her policies as president will incorporate significant elements of the progressive agenda, which would require going against well-funded special interests in Washington.

At the same time, locked in a close general election race with Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton has sought and received the endorsements of a large and notable list of leading Republican veteran policymakers and senior former military officers who believe that Mr. Trump's statements and behavior disqualify him from leading the country and its armed forces. Should Mrs. Clinton win in a close race, she will surely feel some obligation, and need, to cultivate and maintain centrist Republican support to help her govern.

So what I find interesting about the Clinton candidacy is that she will be pulled to the left by progressives and to the center-right by Republicans who backed her against Trump, all the while determining how to separate her policies from those of President Obama on difficult issues like Obamacare and Syria, even as the President and First Lady Michelle Obama have invested time and effort in her campaign. I will not speculate on any future uncertainties from the FBI investigations.

Suffice it to say that just because a Trump Presidency is perceived as unpredictable, does not make a Clinton Presidency any more predictable.

The sad reality is that the political class in Washington DC has become comfortable with the perquisites of power and celebrity while the interests of a critical mass of Americans have not been well served by government policies. The rise of Trump and Sanders and their passionate supporters are a warning sign. What they signal is a genuine crisis of governance – a crisis, it is worth emphasizing, on both sides of the political aisle.

I find it too easy to blame the fall from grace of our elected national representatives on a political system, including a self-censoring media dependent on maintaining favorable access to political leaders, that has become captive of special interests, even though this is the case.

There are deeper trends at play today. Power is no longer the exclusive province of government. Financial power, communications power, the soft power of arts, sports and social media – these and other major elements of daily life exist outside of Washington. What with over one million registered charities in America, and private corporations, educational institutions and membership organizations with immense

resources and influence, our government occupies a different position in American society today than it did a generation ago.

And with so many of our citizens abroad pursuing academic studies, religious activities, and tourism as well as business, we find Americans all over the world having trusted relationships and an understanding of foreign societies and cultures that rivals, and I daresay exceeds, that of our government representatives posted in Embassies abroad. And just as America's population has developed financial, technological and cultural power independent of the government in Washington, so have foreign populations become politically more important.

We need to ask ourselves who among us is most in touch with the pulse of societies around the world.

The Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, the uprising in Ukraine, the mass demonstrations to maintain political autonomy in Hong Kong and against reported official corruption in Malaysia, the forces weakening European unity, the popular rejection of a peace deal in Colombia after eight years of negotiations, the erosion of popular trust in the clerical rulers of Iran – these are among the mega-trends shaping the international environment for years to come.

And where does America stand? This, I contend, is the question much of the rest of the world is asking today. As I have speculated, Mr. Trump wants to project strength, but is poorly positioned to exercise it if elected. Mrs. Clinton would, if elected, inherit many of the existing appointees and policies of President Obama, and would be challenged to forge a consensus behind either continuity or change among the diverse political camps on whose support she is presently relying.

Let's consider the core assumption in Reinhold Niebuhr's warnings about the exercise of power: namely, that American policymakers – be they isolationist or interventionist – view the United States role as that of a conscientious moral actor, pursuing just ends.

President George W. Bush, in whose administration I served, concluded after the attacks on New York, Washington DC and a commercial airliner over Pennsylvania that a forceful, resolute assertion of American power against Al Qaeda and other malign actors in Iraq as well Afghanistan was justified and geopolitically prudent.

After years of very costly and inconclusive intervention in both countries, President Obama took office in 2009 persuaded that the better course for the US was to conclude combat operations and exit both theaters of military engagement as quickly as practicable. Eight years later, as the President postpones deadlines for ending operations in Afghanistan and sends hundreds of special forces into Iraq to advise and assist in the fight against ISIS (or Daesh), what do we take from the first 16 years of the 21st century as a guide to America's role in 2017 and beyond?

To claim that there is one "right" answer would be unwise, I suggest. Each of us has every right to assess the question for ourselves. My answer starts with a clear-eyed admission of our country's failures since 9/11. Our military performed very effectively in decapitating the Taliban regime in Kabul and the Saddam Hussein dictatorship in Baghdad. But the interventions that followed suffered from poor political judgments and ineffective assistance programs.

As the world saw the U.S. suffer enormous casualties from insurgent and militia attacks in Iraq particularly; as adversaries and allies alike watched a humanitarian intervention in Libya morph into the destruction of the Libyan state; as they saw a confused and shifting response to the non-violent popular uprising in Egypt by a younger generation demanding better governance; and as they watched President Obama threaten the use of force in Syria and then withdraw it entirely, leaving the Syrian crisis to spin out of control, some lasting consequences were set in motion.

We will never know whether Vladimir Putin would have introduced Russian forces into Syria in alliance with Iran's regime and undermined the international effort to effect a transition of Bashar Al Assad from power, had Russia faced a more resolute western response to its territorial grab of Crimea in Ukraine. We will never know whether Iran would have truly given up its nuclear program at the P5+1 negotiating table had judicious US military power been used to back political demands for a halt to the Assad regime's destruction of much of Syria. Nor will we know if the politics of East Asia would be shifting in deference to Chinese power had the US clearly and resolutely opposed the excessive territorial air and sea claims advanced by Beijing along the so-called nine-dotted line.

What we do know is that Russia has now moved missiles into Kaliningrad and is making nuclear threats that could challenge NATO's ability to assure security and independence of the Baltic states. We know that even though the International Court of Justice has ruled against China's territorial claims, there has been no western response to China's construction of a landfill island with an airstrip and radar emplacements threatening the Philippines, and now the President of the Philippines has been talking of a strategic shift toward China after over 100 years of alignment with the US, including a treaty alliance with America.

We know that Iran will become, for the first time, a legally recognized nuclear power with no constraints once the provisions of the Joint Comprehensive Program of Action are carried out. And we know that four million Syrians have been displaced from their homes under attack or threat by the Assad regime, with many fleeing to Europe and contributing to the destabilization of European politics.

It is hard to conclude that either President Bush or President Obama has achieved a morally satisfactory result despite their intentions.

So let me return to the question of what America stands for and conclude with my recommended principles for US foreign policy regardless of which candidate may assume the office of President next January 20.

Let me start with an often-ignored issue: management. Today there are too many officials – talented, ambitious, and patriotic public servants – seeking to play meaningful policy roles in Washington. The growth of special portfolios for every topic under the sun has brought about gridlock and incoherence. When every issue is a priority, there are no priorities; and when America is talking with 100 voices sending 100 distinct messages to allies and other major powers, they don't feel compelled to change their own views on any of them, and their confidence in America as a worthy leader among nations is negatively affected. We need to downsize the senior ranks of our government, and empower an elite class of officials to think and act strategically.

This leads to my second recommendation. We need a National Security Strategy worthy of the name. There are several major drivers of global activity that can, if not intelligently addressed, significantly degrade the future security, freedom, prosperity and well-being of the American people. Our central doctrinal document should focus on these drivers. Nuclear proliferation and the threat from violent adversaries such as Al Qaeda and ISIS are already understood. But the emergence of repressive authoritarian rule in the Internet age, in major countries including Russia, China and Iran, poses a dangerous alternative to democracy. The insidious effect of corrupt governance in fragile and failing states poses a major threat not only to legal commerce but to security more broadly, as global illicit trafficking funds terrorist groups. Economics and trade are now core elements of foreign policy. An America whose long-term budget trends point toward solvency is much more likely to retain influence than one whose electoral process cannot arrest the slide toward unsustainable debt.

We also need to face up to the effects of climate change on destructive weather events at home and internationally. As the National Intelligence Council has projected, there will be displaced populations, extremely critical water shortages and stresses on the global food supply if present trends continue.

So we have much to be concerned about, and the United States needs to organize and prioritize. But that is not all we need to do.

If our country is to retain its idealism, and its identity as a morally guided actor, we must answer the core question: what do we stand for? Earlier this year the Association of the US Army held a series of evening discussions with a diverse group of experts aimed at developing an answer to that question: a list of principles describing the kind of world the American people – all 330 million of us – should wish to foster in this century. The resulting list of principles was briefed to both the Trump and Clinton campaigns.

My third and final recommendation, therefore, is that our next President seek broad national consensus around the proposition that America seeks a just world, and will stand for internationally accepted laws, principles and norms of conduct among nations.

A national security strategy will find its moral basis by aligning with broad principles upholding justice for all peoples. The American people, not their government, are the stakeholders of this constitutional republic. As Washington DC works through its own crisis, Americans can and should rediscover their common ethos, striving for excellence and facing the world with confidence and generosity rather than fear.

Power is shifting from governments to governed in the age of social media, and problems and solutions are as likely to arise from within populations as from their governments. With a more focused, updated, coherent and organized national effort in Washington, the United States can regain lost credibility and influence, and once again set a worthy example for other countries to emulate.

To do so, we must all recognize that military and economic might are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the successful exercise of American power in the world. Our most potent assets are not physical but psychological. America's reputation is the source of our power, meaning our reputation for acting with strategic wisdom, setting worthy objectives, leading by example, supporting the legitimate aspirations of other peoples, and being a reliable supporter of international law and justice.

Some will say that the political crisis in America renders a bold, corrective approach all but impossible to implement. I beg to differ, because what I see in the American people is a powerful desire to see change in Washington and an American role that demonstrates more success in addressing the chaos and insecurity in the international arena.

Perhaps my optimism is unjustified. But for all the dark trends and frustrations we see today, remember that we are still a great, strong and prosperous country. It is not too late to step up to the major challenges with resolve and ingenuity, knowing that doing so is not only our duty, but our calling as citizens of the most successful political enterprise in the history of mankind. May you all live to see a brighter future.

Thank you.