

Houston Philosophical Society

636th Meeting

Cohen House

March 18, 2010

Under the leadership of President Evelyn Keyes, the Society gathered for a reception and dinner meeting. Following dinner, Vice President Herb Ward assisted in the introduction of both visitors and newly elected members of the Society.

President Keyes then introduced the speaker of the evening, Ambassador Edward P. Djerejian, Founding Director of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University. His topic was "Danger and Opportunity: An American Ambassador's Journey through the Middle East."

Ambassador Djerejian is one of the United States' most distinguished diplomats whose career has spanned the administrations of eight U.S. Presidents, from John F. Kennedy to William J. Clinton. A leading expert on the complex political, security, economic, religious and ethnic issues of the Middle East, he has played key roles in the Arab-Israeli peace process, the U.S. led coalition against Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, successful efforts to end the civil war in Lebanon, the release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon, and the establishment of collective and bilateral security arrangements in the Persian Gulf.

He is the author of *Danger and Opportunity: An American Ambassador's Journey Through the Middle East* (Simon & Schuster, 2008). It was originally planned that copies would be available for purchase at Cohen House and members were subsequently informed of their availability elsewhere.

The Baker Institute for Public Policy has brought to Rice University a think tank with a dedication to public service. Since its establishment in 1994 numerous world leaders have appeared at the Institute including Mandela, Putin, Gorbachev and former Presidents Ford, Carter, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton.

The ambassador drew on his recent book which he updated to the present time. The focus was the Middle East which he described as a huge space, complex and differentiated from North Africa to the Persian Gulf. He reminded the audience that only 20% of the world's Muslims are Arabs.

The speaker concentrated on the complicated and critical problem that the Arab-Israeli conflict poses for the world and its safety. Gone are the days of what he called the bipolar Cold War where some safety derived from the presence of MAD (mutually assured destruction) in the form of nuclear weapons which helped limit the world's conflicts to traditional weapons.

He indicated that it was not the case of the Judaeo-Christian nations vs. others with different religious beliefs. The end of the long conflict with communism should not see the emergence of an expanded

conflict with Islam. From the emergence of the Soviet Union in the period surrounding the end of World War I until its implosion in the late 1980's our policy seemed to be one of fixing problems between nations and then moving on to the next problem. In the course of this the Muslims were radicalized by the likes of Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaida movement. So communism gave way to extremism and terrorism including the 1993 first attempt to destroy the World Trade Center. Eight years later the events of 9/11/01 occurred with their impact on our public consciousness.

Our purpose became one of conflict resolution, the mediation of critical conflicts including the ongoing one between Arabs and Israelis. The conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis united Arabs and Muslims around the world. The ambassador was in Israel when Rabin was Prime Minister and when he became a warrior for peace advocating the withdrawal from the occupied territories. A Jewish extremist killed Rabin over the territory return proposal, but the ambassador believes Rabin was right.

An Israeli/Syrian peace was critical and the hope was the Lebanon would join and Israel (already in better relations with Jordan) would now be safer. Conflict management could be replaced by conflict resolution. The U.S. President, whoever that might be, had to fade the heat from both sides and become the honest broker in the dispute. This was the only way to achieve peace.

The role of the U.S. became that of the promoter of reform. Political and Economic reform were critical since there were major deficits in education, economies, and human rights. It would not be possible to establish a Jeffersonian democracy in the sands of the Middle East.

One key would be the efforts of King Abdullah to move Saudi Arabia toward participatory governance, first with representatives, and ultimately with elected representatives.

The ambassador viewed the most recent war in Iraq as a war of choice not of necessity. The first Gulf War had seen a massive international coalition amassed by Secretary Baker and President George H.W. Bush but that approach was rejected by George W. Bush.

The situation in Israel remains complicated and the idea of new settlements has become critical. A considerable effort was made by a Baker Institute team to work through to a territorial end game. For some eighteen months Israelis and Palestinians worked in an effort mentored by the Institute to accomplish the goal. Any solution will have to be a compromise solution in which swaps are made to apportion the land among the contenders. For this to be accomplished there were need to be a strong political will on the part of U.S., Palestinian, and Israeli leaders.

Syria poses a different type of problem. Some 80% of the issues have been dealt with in the area of land, peace, security, and water, but Syria has a clever Machiavellian leader. In the Middle East the election and re-election of dictators is common.

Afghanistan is a particular problematic region which the ambassador described as a conundrum. It is Obama's war now and a secure environment is needed to expand schools, roads, clinics, and the rule of law to the people to win them over. There is a saying there that "where the roads end the Taliban begins." No formula for success exists but it must include attacking Al-Qaida and the bad Taliban and to

reinforce the central government. The situation is not one of tribalism, but is even more localized into "valleyism."

We do not speak the language of these countries. Arabic linguists are critical but so are those who are fluent in Farsi, Pashtu, and Turkish. Despite Colin Powell's efforts there were only a total of four Foreign Service Officers who could watch Aljazeera and then appear there to rebut them.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are the cauldron and the presence of nuclear weapons in both Pakistan and India only serves to complicate the situation.

The ambassador believes that Iran is not the major threat in the Middle East and that containment and deterrence may be the key there. Military action can deter but not end the Iranian nuclear ambitions.

A dialog with adversaries and enemies is critical. We make peace by communicating with our enemies not our friends.

There are some promising developments in the realm of education and social progress. Particularly as a result of the work of non-government organizations we see women with new roles. The ambassador believes that the Islamists must become an integral part of the body politic for success to be attained.

Ambassador Djerejian's remarks were well received and a dialogue followed his presentation involving several of those present.

Don R. Byrnes

Recording Secretary