Introduction

The breadth of former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell’s lifelong career in public service to this country and the world is, in a word, breathtaking. It includes all three branches of our national government – federal district judge, United States Senator and Senate Majority Leader, and Special Envoy under two American presidents. He has served in law enforcement as United States Attorney for Maine. While in the Senate, he led re-authorization of the Clean Air Act of 1990 and passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, both signed into law by President George H.W. Bush; and he guided passage of North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement of 1994, signed into law by President Bill Clinton.

Some highlights of his post-Senate career include service as U.S. Special Envoy for Northern Ireland in 1995, and architect of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998; founder of the Mitchell Institute in 1995, to encourage young people from every Maine community to aspire to and achieve a college education; co-chair (with former House Speaker Newt Gingrich) of the congressional Task Force on United Nations Reform in 2005; chairman of the Walt Disney Company from 2004-07, and membership on the boards on many other national corporations; director of the Investigation of Steroid Use in Major League Baseball in 2006-07; and U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace in 2009. In 1999 he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Bill Clinton.

Among his proudest contributions, personally, is the Mitchell Institute, which conducts important research on Maine student aspirations and annually provides a scholarship to a graduate of every Maine public high school who plans to attend college.

Beyond all this, it is said there is one job here in Maine to which Sen. Mitchell aspired when he was young, but has not yet held: Mayor of the City Waterville, his home. All things considered, however, George Mitchell is surely the most accomplished public servant in the history of this state. It is an honor to present our former United States Senator George Mitchell of Waterville. (K.P.)

GEORGE MITCHELL: Thank you, very much, Ken, for your extremely generous introduction. Thank you, ladies and gentleman, for your presence and your warm reception. To President Kalikow and the faculty and officials of the University, it is pleasure for me to be here.
The Mitchell Institute

My scholarship program has been mentioned. I’m often asked by reporters and the media, “What do you think is the most significant contribution of your career?” Most ask about Ireland and my years as Senate Majority Leader; but I believe that the most important thing in my life after my family has been the Mitchell Institute and its scholarship program. We give out a scholarship each year to a graduate of every high school in Maine. Since I left the Senate to found this program, we have distributed over $10 million in direct assistance to more than two thousand deserving young Maine people. (Applause)

More than half, over a thousand, have gone to the University of Maine System; and at this moment there are more than 250 in the system.

“Success is not the outcome of every effort, but everyone should have a fair chance to succeed.”

USM has played a large role, as we’ve had about 150 students here; more than 25 are here now. Two-thirds of our students are the first members of their families ever to go to college, and we include need as one criterion. As against the national average and the figures for the University of Maine System, we have a very high rate of graduation; that is, our young people start, finish.

Maine has a very unfortunate pyramid of educational attainment; that is, we have a very high rate of graduation from high school and a very low rate of graduation from college, compared with the rest of New England and the nation. The principal barrier we have found, through research at the Institute, is financial; so, we do our best to make it possible for every young person in Maine to have the same chance in life that I had.

My mother was an immigrant who could not read or write; my father was the orphaned son of immigrants who left school after the fourth grade. Because of their efforts – but more importantly, because of the openness of American society; and because I was the beneficiary of many helping hands along the way – I want to devote my life to see to it that others in Maine who are in a situation similar to that in which I found myself have the chance to get an education – to go as high and as far as their talent and willingness to work will take them.

I believe that in America nobody should be guaranteed success, but everyone should have a fair chance to succeed; and that means education, knowledge, and skills.

So, I thank you for mentioning the Institute. I did want to mention it to all of you, in case you want to help out in some way, at some point in time.

On Competition & Collaboration

Let me begin our topic today with another story. On the day that I was elected Senate Majority Leader, among the first persons I called was Bob Dole of Kansas, then the Republican Leader of the Senate. I asked if I could come see him, and he said, “Of course.” I walked down the hall to his office, where I said to him that these are very tough jobs; that he had been in the Senate for many years, and I was relatively new, just a few years in the Senate; and that I did not think either of us could succeed, nor could the Senate, if there were no trust between us. I said, “I’ve come here to tell you how I intend to behave toward you, and to ask if you would reciprocate, and act the same way toward me.”

Then I described the most simple, basic principles of fairness and common courtesy. I told him that I would never surprise him, that’s important in the Senate; that I’ll always give him the opportunity to think about his response to any action I was going to take as Majority Leader. I told him that I would never try to embarrass him; that I would never criticize him personally when we disagreed, to the extent that I could humanly do so; and that I would keep the debate on the merits of the issue, and not make it personal. Bob Dole was delighted. He shook my hand and to this moment, never has one harsh word passed between him and me – never in public or in private.

Every year my scholarship program has a dinner here in the Portland area, and I invite a speaker. A few years ago, Bob Dole came and spoke on behalf of my program. He was so impressed, he went back to Kansas and started a similar program there. Last year, I went to Kansas to promote Bob and his program.

I tell that story to say, it can be done. It need not be as personal and acrimonious and difficult as it is now – although I balance that by saying that politics in the United States has always been rough-and-tumble. There is a tendency on the part of most humans to look back through rose-colored glasses and imagine an ideal time when there was not controversy, when there was all cooperation. That has never existed in our political system.

University of Maine Professor Amy Fried wrote an op-ed piece in the Bangor Daily News last year, describing the presidential election of 1800, in which the name-calling between John Adams, the incumbent president, and Thomas Jefferson, the challenger, exceeded anything heard in the most recent presidential election campaign. A supporter of Jefferson called Adams a hermaphrodite, that he had neither the firmness of a man nor the gentleness of a lady. He went on to say other harsh things, and Adams’
supporters responded with even *more* vitriolic attacks on Jefferson.

No matter what happened between Obama and Romney, nobody called the other guy a hermaphrodite; and it’s been rough for the President ever since. Frankly, when I was there, I thought it was very tough, very hard to manage and to restrain – even though Bob Dole and I were close friends, had dinner a couple of times a week, and talked several times a day. It isn’t easy, and it won’t be easy to restore some degree of civility.

One reason is, there is a deeply ambivalent approach to politics in American life. We, of course, value competition in *every* aspect of our society. We believe that, in economic affairs, competition produces the best results for consumers. We’re glued to the television on Sunday, as we watch sporting events in which competition prevails. Our judicial system is based on the premise that a competitive process is the one best designed to reveal truth. And nobody, even the harshest critics of American politics today, suggests we should have a one-party system or a one-party state. We want, we need, and we demand competition.

At the same time, we want, we demand cooperation. Unlike business, where there are laws governing the mechanisms by which competition occurs; and unlike the judicial system, where we have a highly controlled system of adversarial discussion to arrive at truth, there are no such abiding and enforced rules in politics.

The Importance of Listening

If I asked each of you here to write a single paragraph on where the line is drawn between competition and cooperation in politics, I guarantee you, no two answers would be alike. You would also come to what we all, as humans, are afflicted by: when we hear arguments and information that are consistent with our prior beliefs, we have wide-open receptors in our brain that receive, welcome, and remember that information. When we hear arguments and data that *conflict* with our prior beliefs, we have very tiny receptors and are disposed to resist the information. It’s hard for the things we don’t believe in to get through to us. We all see events and interpret facts based on our prior beliefs and perceptions. We *all* do it.

President George W. Bush was elected president in 2000 by a very narrow electoral vote, and a less than the majority popular vote. In 2004, he was re-elected and received about 280 electoral votes with a plurality of about 3 million votes. The *Wall Street Journal* wrote in an editorial that few presidents in American history have enjoyed the mandate that President Bush received in this election; that he now had a true mandate to govern. Eight years later, in 2012, when President Obama was re-elected by a total of 330 electoral votes and a popular vote margin of 5 million votes, the *Wall Street Journal* said he does not have a mandate, and he cannot claim one to govern!

While I pick an example that may sound partisan, I don’t want to suggest that people on the other side don’t act the same way. We interpret events in a manner consistent with our prior beliefs. If we are to break out of the situation we’re in, there have to be individual and collective efforts to try better to *listen*, to understand the point of view of those whom we oppose.

“We have to open our ears and our minds and our hearts to the views of those with whom we disagree. We have to have the humility to accept that we are not always right – no individual, no institution, no political party.... We don’t have the moral authority or standing to say that we can’t be wrong, or that those who oppose us cannot be right!”

People ask me often, how did it happen in Northern Ireland, with hundreds of years of conflict and many prior efforts to bring about a solution? There are all kinds of reasons, far too many to go into today; but I’m certain that one of the reasons I was able to gain the confidence of the parties to the negotiations is that, I listened! I especially listened to the people whose views I didn’t agree with. We *all* have to make an effort to open up our ears and our minds to those with whom we disagree; and we all have to have the humility to accept the reality that we are *not* always right – no individual, no institution, no political party.

I’m a Democrat, and I’m proud of it; but I’m frank enough to say that the Democratic Party has made many, many mistakes in its long history. On the most important moral issue in all American history, the issue of race, the Democratic Party was on the wrong side for 100 years. We don’t have the moral authority or standing to say that we can’t be wrong, or that those who oppose us cannot be right! The intolerance now demonstrated on the other side by some who presume to have a level of certainty, a righteousness about their positions is one of the obstacles that we face; but we *all* have to recognize that this is *part of us as humans*, part of our society. We have to open our ears and our minds and our hearts to the views of those with whom we disagree. We have to have that *necessary humility* about our own positions.

Why We Are Where We Are

Let me talk about a few of the reasons we’re in the fix we’re in. I won’t go into great detail, and I don’t presume
to have any superior knowledge on the matter. I’m not a historian, or a social scientist; I work full-time and don’t have time to devote to analysis. What I’m giving to you is just a few opinions about why we are where we are.

First, redistricting. We benefit every day from technology. It’s accelerating, it enhances life, and those of us with children know how rapidly generations can change in almost every aspect of life through technology. But technology is, and of itself, and like all science, neutral. It doesn’t favor outcomes, it enables us to produce outcomes; and how we use technology makes a difference.

Technology now permits a degree of precision in redistricting that didn’t exist for most of our nation’s history. I would ask each of you to look at some of the maps of districts in the U.S. House of Representatives today. There you will see the fruits of highly computerized and partisan redistricting. It has now developed to a degree that most of those who serve today in the House of Representatives do not run in competitive districts. Most estimates are that, of the 435 house seats, fewer than 50 are genuinely competitive.

Most members now sitting in House seats know that the outcome of the next election in their district will be in the favor of their party or the other. In other words, you can predict the party-outcome now because of the manner in which redistricting has occurred.

In the mid-term congressional elections, far fewer than that; and in the nominating primary process, only a tiny fraction of the American people participate. This gives hugely disproportionate influence to the most activist, the most ideological, the most rigid, and the most uncompromising persons in their parties, on both sides.

I watched a television talk-show a few months ago where they showed a film-clip of a Tea Party member of the House of Representatives who stood up and said, in effect, “I’m against compromise. Compromise is what’s created all our problems, and we can’t compromise. We have got to have it our way!” When you think about it, in a country of 315 million people, the most diverse nation on earth, with hugely competing regional, social, and other interests, to suggest that anybody can run this country without compromise is a fantasy!

One of the two commentators criticized the House member for his remark, and said, “I’ll bet 90 percent of the people disagree with him.” The other said, “Yes, but he’s talking to the one in ten who might participate in the nominating process, and who shares his view.” That is why redistricting plays such an enormous role, particularly in the US House of Representatives.

Second, Money! It’s been a while since I was Senate Majority Leader. One day, at a meeting of my colleagues, frustrated and angry as I looked at the day’s calendar, I told them: “Every morning when I get to work around seven o’clock, I have on my desk at least a dozen calls from other senators, saying, ‘Please don’t have a vote at noon because I have a fund-raising lunch; please don’t have a vote of four o’clock ‘cause I have a fund-raising meeting; please don’t have a vote at five o’clock ‘cause I have fund-raising reception; don’t have a vote at six o’clock ‘cause I have fund-raising dinner; and don’t have a vote at eight o’clock ‘cause there’s another event after.’”’ I said to them, “I if I granted every request I had, not to have a vote when someone’s having a fund-raising event, the only time we could vote is between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. on Thursdays.” (Laughter)

I purposely exaggerated to make a point; but if it was bad then, it’s ten times worse now. There is a mad money-chase that is occurring that is demeaning to the participants; and most importantly, it has severed the bond of trust between the American people and their elected representatives that is crucial to the effective functioning of our democracy.

I’ll illustrate this by asking a question that I have asked all over America, to audiences from Maine to Florida to California. “How many of you believe that members of Congress are more responsive to their constituents than they are to their donors?” Does anyone here believe that? Not a single hand. In more than a year of asking this, only one person has ever raised her hand. It was in Washington, where a woman raised her hand, got up, and said,
“My husband is a member of Congress!” (Laughter)

The problem is not that members of Congress are openly corrupt, that someone walks in and says, “I’ll give you $20,000 if you will vote this way or that on a bill.” It’s more subtle than that, and more difficult to deal with. Most members actually get money from people who agree with the positions they had when they were elected. The problem is that, to run for office now, you need to raise these fantastic sums of money; and you have to devote time, effort, and energy that would better be spent trying to meet the needs and demands of the people.

This has been greatly aggravated by the atrocious decision by the United States Supreme Court in the Citizens United case, which basically said, “There’s a fire, so let’s pour a can of gasoline on it.” (Applause) I invite and challenge each of you to get that decision and read it. First, you’ll have a very hard time plowing through it. It is illogical, almost incoherent; and the premise on which it is based is absolutely and obviously false – namely, that the American people don’t think that corruption follows from financial contributions to Congress.

Read the opinion. You won’t be able to fathom it; but what you will recognize is that it is divorced from the reality of the American electoral process today. I want to be clear: the Court didn’t create the problem, the problem was there long before the decision was rendered. It aggravates it greatly, however, and makes it more difficult to bring the present crisis under control.

Finally, Television. I don’t want to insult people here who work in television. Again, the technology is neutral, it brings us enormous benefits, and it is one of the great inventions in all of human history. Yet, it carries with it the misuse that we see now in negative television spots.

In the 2012 Republican presidential primary, almost all the TV spots were negative. In the presidential campaign, itself, we in Maine lagged behind the country in negative advertising; but it has reached here. You all saw the ads run against Angus King in the last election. Nobody makes a positive case anymore, it’s all negative. If you’re a member of the public, and you have two candidates calling each other a bum and a crook, and spending millions of dollars to do it: why should you believe anything different, if that’s all you hear?

I don’t advocate censorship in any form, or restraints upon the television industry of any kind, or the use of electronic media to convey certain views. What I do advocate for is a way to control the limitless flow of money into the electoral process, the vast majority of which goes to television advertising. We can legally and constitutionally control the amounts of money that are being contributed and spent.

Ultimately, it will change only if the American people demand change. This is a representative democracy. So many of you nodded your heads when I talked about negative ads. The polls are very clear, Americans don’t like them. The same polls are equally clear that people are moved by them. Most people running for office are intelligent people, some are very smart, and they would not use a tactic unless they believed it would be successful. They know that you and everybody else think negative advertising is not a good thing in politics; and they know it has a beneficial effect for them.

“Without a doubt, people who contribute large sums of money or raise large sums of money for elected officials gain access, to get their views across, to a degree that simply doesn’t exist for most ordinary citizens.”

There may be limited circumstances where negative ads don’t work, but the vast majority do; and they are going to increase in the future. You can imagine a world in which the amount of money spent increases exponentially, and the vitriol distributed around the country continues indefinitely. It’s very difficult, and it’s easier to describe the problem than to prescribe a solution; but it will not happen until the American people say, “Enough is enough!” In some election somewhere, in some state, in some district, people are going to rise up and convey a message through the ballot box, which is where it has to be conveyed. I hope it happens here in Maine, if it doesn’t happen elsewhere; because this is a representative democracy, and The People do decide what kind of government we are going to have.

A Final Word About Mr. Muskie

After my parents, the most influential person in my life has been Ed Muskie. He was my employer, my hero, my mentor, and my friend. He was also the smartest person I have ever met. Smart as he was, he was human, and he had his faults. I’m going to tell you one story, of a time that I didn’t follow his lead.

When he hired me, I was very excited and nervous. Among his faults, Senator Muskie had quite a temper, and so I was a little afraid of him. He asked me to come with him to Maine, back home on a week’s congressional recess, where he had a series of events planned. I drove and was sort of an all-around go-fer for him. He started in Rumford, spoke every night across the state, and ended in Calais.

It was a wonderful time; and he was well-received, he was so intelligent and persuasive in his arguments. And we finished later and later, each night. After six days of this, we were driving back to Bangor where we would stay overnight and fly out the next day. We left Calais
and drove onto the well-known Airline, 100 miles of road through the woods between Calais and Bangor. It was rainy, foggy, and we were quite silent, both very tired.

After about 20 minutes Mr. Muskie said to me, “What did you think of my speeches?” I had a moment of panic, because I didn’t know if I should dare tell him the truth, or say nice things. I decided I would tell him the truth, that I thought they were too long. “They were great, especially in Rumford,” I said. “You gave a really great speech the first time, and the audience loved it; the second time, you went on and on about the same subject, and they were getting a little tired; the third time, they were exhausted. After the first, they were all too long.”

There was a long silence, and I began to get nervous. I thought, hopefully, “Maybe he fell asleep? Or maybe I’m going to get fired and thrown out of the car right here on the Airline?” Finally, he said to me in a very low and calm voice, “You’re a smart young man, George, and some-day you’ll be giving speeches like I just did. When you do, you will find that there is nothing in the world like the sound of your own voice!” (Laughter)

Every time I go on a little too long, I tell that story. I’m sorry I got carried away. Thank you all very much for having me. I’ll be glad now to take whatever questions you may have. (Applause)

**Q & A**

**Question:** I would like to begin by offering an unsolicited plug for Senator Mitchell’s book, Making Peace. It is a superb book, both because of how much insight it offers into negotiation under the most trying circumstances, helping lifelong enemies come to agreement; and also because it is revealing of the character of George Mitchell, himself: Those of you who would like to know the Senator better owe it to yourselves to read Making Peace.

In it, Senator, you say that in the politics of Northern Ireland, there is not a tradition of anybody ever giving up anything! You go on to say that what made agreement possible was that the vast majority of people had had enough of the violence, and the highly publicized and emotional funerals that followed. They were sick of it, they wanted change, they were demanding change. Do you see any signs of such change in this country – that people have had enough?

**MITCHELL:** No, because there is one obvious and dramatic difference in the circumstances: what they were tired of was the violence. There was enormous fear and anxiety, thousands of people killed, and (not well known in this country) tens of thousands brutally and permanently maimed. The number of deaths was not high in comparison to what has occurred in the Middle East and in Africa; but the number of permanently maimed was very, very high. The car bomb was invented in Northern Ireland; the method of kneecapping, of firing bullets through both a person’s knees and frequently both ankles, to permanently cripple him, was first practiced there. There was overwhelming fear, such an abnormal life – that is, people just couldn’t live a normal life because of the fear, because death was so random – that the people were exhausted.

Northern Ireland is a conservative society in which women had not previously played a large role. Many of those who were killed – originally, at least – were military and police personnel, mostly male. Their mothers, sisters, and relatives began to get active; and women began to take a more significant role, demanding an end to this violence.

It isn’t the same here. We are all disgusted by what is going on; but it does not have the immediate impact that widespread and brutal violence has on people, on individual lives. It doesn’t permeate and dominate life so much as if your husband or child was murdered. When that happens, people are so consumed they really can’t focus on anything else, they have trouble thinking of going to work, going to school, doing things. We haven’t reached that stage here and, I certainly hope we never do.

With respect to violence, we get enough of that outside the political process; but I do think there comes a moment in history, in every society, when people demand change. You are seeing it now in the Middle East. I think there will eventually be some event that will trigger a change in American attitudes, and lead to people’s taking the large, broad view that’s held about this now, and converting it into action.

**Question:** I am a student of political science at USM, and am also in a program that the Democratic Party runs, to train women to run for office. How we can encourage women and people of color and other minorities that are not represented fully in politics right now, and involve their voices to a fuller participation in the system.

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MITCHELL: One of the paradoxes of life is that the solution to every human problem contains the seeds of a new problem. One of the reasons we have this extreme gerrymandering is that there are legal requirements with the respect to minority representation; and this requires some form or degree of gerrymandering to enable effective representation. This has been taken by some who really don’t favor it, to an extreme that has produced a disproportionate and adverse result. You have to be careful, very careful in what you do, because secondary and tertiary effects sometimes have far more negative results than the benefits that accrue from what you are trying to do in the first place, unless it is done carefully.

Otherwise, we have continuously to encourage full participation by all, and break down the barriers that have for so long bound us. I’m optimistic in this regard. We are all so fortunate to be Americans, to be citizens of this great nation. For all its many imperfections, it remains the most free, the most open, and the most just society on earth, and the first meritocracy in all of human history. When I make criticisms, I’m not suggesting a lack of faith in our society; it’s more a desire to improve it. We’ve shown in our history that among the greatest things about our society is the capacity to confront wrong, to take actions, to improve.

We all, rightly, revere our Constitution, a great political and literary achievement. Yet, our Constitution explicitly endorsed the concept and practice of racial indifference and intolerance. A black person was considered by the Constitution not be to be a full person, only three-fifths. It actually specified the fraction, and it took three generations and the bloodiest war in our history to extend the right to vote from adult white men who owned property to all males. Then it took another 60 years and a bitter political battle to extend the right to women. It seems so preposterous to us now, that anybody could even argue about the proposition; yet it took 60 years of intense argument.

It took 100 years after the Civil War to have even the beginnings of genuine racial integration. It wasn’t until 1965, when the Voting Rights Act passed, that for the first time black Americans could not be denied the right to vote just because of the color of their skin – a proposition so incredible that it’s hard to imagine that just 50 years ago it was in doubt. It was a fierce political battle. Now we are engaged in similar struggles with respect to sexual orientation.

The American people have shown a remarkable willingness to confront errors, to improve, to expand our notion and definition of civil and human rights, to accommodate the dynamics of history that occur in every society. I’m pretty confident, really, about the future overall, and particularly in this area.

Question: You spoke about your informal poll of audiences, about whether people believe that the politicians are more responsive to their constituents or to their donors. The results are not surprising, because we all know everyone is so jaded; but it’s so disheartening. How true is it, that politicians are more responsive to their donors than to their constituents?

Mitchell: Without a doubt, people who contribute large sums of money or raise large sums of money for elected officials gain access, to get their views across, to a degree that simply doesn’t exist for most ordinary citizens.

They say that necessity breeds invention. After I was appointed to the U.S. Senate and before I ran in my first election to the office, I was 36 percentage points behind in the polls and given no chance to win. The Bangor Daily News reported a poll that indicated my opponent would defeat me by 36 points; the sub-headline quoted the pollster, “He has no chance to win.”

“We have to accept the fact that people elsewhere have different interests. If they have the right of self-governance, they are going to produce results that we disagree with at times. We can’t say that we are for democracy only in those cases where people agree with us.”

Well, this focused my mind, and I searched for ways to distinguish myself from the other candidates. What I came up with was to state publicly that I would meet privately with any person in Maine who wanted to speak with me. Would you be surprised to learn that not a heck of a lot of people cared to meet with me at that time? I would come on Saturday’s and Sunday’s to Portland, Bangor, Presque Isle, and Rockland, where I had offices, sit in my office, and anybody who wanted it could have 10 minutes. I got a lot of cranks and a lot of criticisms; but I learned a lot, and it was extremely helpful to me then and later.

This got very difficult, however, when I became Senate Majority Leader and had a lot of people who wanted to see me. I would spend a week in Washington, arguing over some bill and fighting like it was life-and-death. Then I’d come back to Maine and meet 30 or 40 people – and not one would even mention that bill. They talked about their mortgage, their job, their kids’ school, or something; and this helped me remain grounded – and it obviously helped me politically, too.

In general, however, elected officials more easily and readily grant access to those who are substantial contributors, than to ordinary citizens. It doesn’t mean they don’t
meet with ordinary citizens – they come home, they hold
town meetings, and so forth; but in terms of getting 15
minutes to tell you exactly what to think about a particular
bill or position, there is a mismatch there.

Q uest i on: I especially appreciate your comments
about the importance of humility. Taking that from
the national scene to the international, the basic question
is, What is the appropriate role for the United States to
play, whether in Syria, the Middle East, Kenya and all of
Africa, or North Korea and all of Asia? Should we have
humility about who we are – not becoming the policeman
of the world, and being sensitive to the incredible violence
and suffering that’s going on?

MITCHELL: A great question. Throughout human his-
tory, there have been dominant powers, “dominant” gen-
erally defined in economic and military terms. Without
seeking world dominance, the United States, dating largely
to the period immediately following the first World
War, has become the dominant power in the world eco-
nomically, militarily, and, increasingly, culturally.

Being in that position provides great benefits. A lot of economic ben-
efits flow to Americans because the dollar is the
reserve currency around
the world. At the same
time, it produces nega-
tive consequences. There
is inevitably a lot of re-
sentment and envy in any
dominant-subordinate
relationship, whether
between nations or indi-
viduals. People who ask
for help and receive it
frequently are both grate-
ful and resentful at the same time. There develops around
the world – as there has about the United States – a myth
of omnipotence. Everything that happens in the world is
believed by some to be the consequence of our actions.

When I travel in parts of Asia and the Middle East, I
illustrate this point by telling a story about the business-
man who wakes up one morning in Karachi, Pakistan,
goes into the shower and turns it on, and finds there is
no hot water. “A-hah!” he says, “there go Obama and the
CIA again!”(Laughter) And that myth has spread to this
country, as well. People believe that we have the power to
control everything. We don’t; and we have to be prudent
in how we use our power.

I believe that it is in our national interest to be involved
around the world. If 9/11 demonstrated nothing else, it
showed there is no wall high enough to secure the safety
of our people. We do have enemies in the world. Some
are the consequence of our mistaken actions; but many
are not generated by that reason. There are people who
want to do us harm, and do our citizens harm. It is a high
priority for our national leaders to protect us, and this of-ten requires affirmative, aggressive action in other parts
of the world to prevent people from organizing to conduct
the kind of death and destruction here that might other-
wise ensue. How to find the proper balance is the real
challenge.

The even more difficult challenge is the one you pose:
When do we intervene in affairs around the world? We
have never had a proper debate of this vital question in
this country, not even among our political leaders, let
alone among our ordinary citizens. Does a humanitarian
cause, by itself, justify an American military intervention;
or does it require some additional fact or factors that di-
rectly involve our national interest or national security?
Think about that. When, where, and how should we in-
tervene?

I spoke in London about six months ago, about the
Middle East. When I finished, a man got up and deliv-
ered a brutal and harsh denunciation of President Obama.
He said, “60,000 Syrians have died, and the blood is on
Barack Obama’s hands; and Senator Mitchell, it’s on your
hands, too, because you Americans have the military
capacity to intervene and send troops in there. Stop this
killing!” I said to him that, by complete coincidence that
morning, the Financial Times of London reported that in
the Congo, 2 million people had died.

“Why are you not standing up, demanding that the
United States intervene in the Congo, because 2 million
have died as against 60,000 Syrians?” I asked. Before he
could answer, an African man jumped up, from the other
side of the room, and said in a loud voice, “Senator Mitch-
ell, you’re wrong. It’s 5 million, not 2 million!” And sure
enough, a few months later the CIA declassified a report
that 5 1/2 million people had died in the Congo. How, and
on what basis do we decide these matters?

If you think that’s complicated, let me tell you a few
things about the future. Right now, at this moment, there
about 7 billion people on earth. One in five is Muslim,
some one and a quarter billion people. Between 2050 and
2060, based on current United Nations population projec-
tions, there will be between 9 1/2 and 10 billion people on
earth; and one out of three
will be Muslim. There will be
3 1/2 billion Muslims in the world, which equals the total
population of the world as recently as 1965.

The internal conflict in Islam between Sunni and Shia,
which dates back to the contest for succession to the
prophet Muhammad 1300 years ago, is intensifying. In all
of these countries, populations will be rising dramatically,
and the competition for jobs, for economic growth, for land, for water, for natural resources will intensify. What we’re seeing now is going to become the new norm.

This is not an aberration in history. I saw a man on television just last week who said, “You know, the Egyptians had this Tahrir Square thing a year and half ago now, and they still haven’t figured it out.” He is imposing upon the Arabs a standard that no western democracy has ever met. In the United States, in a far simpler time, eight years elapsed between the time the American Revolution ended and United States government was established. In France, 50 years. In England, 230 years. Yet people here go around saying, “Well they’ve got to sort it out next week, next month, this year!”

This is going to go on for very long time. And the central challenge we will face is to determine on a rational and logical basis, when and how we should intervene. We all begin from the premise that we can’t simply intervene everywhere; it’s impossible. There isn’t any way we can involve ourselves militarily in every conflict in the world. We also begin from the premise that we cannot deny ourselves the right to intervene where our national interest is involved.

What we need is a debate that helps us define what we mean by the national interest today and tomorrow. The specific question I come back to is, “What role does humanitarian assistance play in that decision?” These are very tough questions. So tough, that people tend to avoid them, ignore them, and not discuss them. Even if you get the best brains in this country or in the world, you cannot draw up a universally accepted set of criteria that will dictate every decision in the future. What you need to rely on and trust in a democratic society is the integrity and judgment of those who are elected to high office. That is what matters in the end.

President Obama’s getting a lot of criticism now, and I’ll say this: American presidents for the next half-century had better have a high level of restraint; because if they don’t, we’re going to face not just two, not just 12 worldviews, we are going to have them all over the globe. We will be asked to intervene over and over and over again, and there will be circumstances when it will be right to do so. The problem is, we cannot now know when, where, and how they will occur. It is a case-by-case circumstance, depending upon our interest at the time, our alliances, our commitments, our policies, and everything else.

A nation is a collection of individuals. Every individual, every human being is fallible. Every one of us wakes up each morning saying, “I’m going to do right today, I’m not going to tell a lie, I am not going to cheat, I’m not going to do anything wrong;” and every single one of us fails, every day. Then we get up the next day, and we try to do better; we try to match our actions to our aspirations. It is the same with nations. As a country, we don’t always succeed in matching our actions to our aspirations, sometimes we fail. Sometimes out of genuine necessity, sometimes out of error, sometimes out of mistaken judgment; but the fact is, in the United States we recognize it, and we try. We try to elevate ourselves to a level that does meet our aspirations.

In the end, what really matters is that we can’t stray too far from our aspirations. We can’t be for democracy here, and not for it elsewhere. We can’t define democracy as the election of a government that agrees with everything we do; that’s just too inconsistent. We have to accept the fact that people elsewhere have different interests. If they have the right of self-governance, they are going to produce results that we disagree with at times. We can’t say that we are for democracy only in those cases where people agree with us.

And I thank you all, very much. (Applause)