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Ladies and Gentlemen:

Once again, I have been honored by the National Council on US-Arab Relations and stand before you to offer a few thoughts on where we -- Americans and Arabs -- are and where we may go from here. I speak for myself alone, not for any organization with which I am affiliated. I speak because I believe US-Arab relations matter greatly to my country and because, unlike many in Washington, I do not believe in diplomacy-free foreign policy and have a healthy regard for what is now derided as "reality-based analysis."

Some things are, of course, going right in the Middle East. The Saudis are clearly winning their struggle against violent extremists. Palestinians in Gaza have been released from direct occupation by Israeli settlers and soldiers. Lebanese are exploring a new measure of autonomy, following the long-overdue Syrian withdrawal from their country. Syrians, relieved of the burden of keeping order in Lebanon, may finally attempt their own reforms. Women are being admitted to a larger role in society in some Gulf Arab countries. Annoying as the results are to many, the expanded press freedoms pioneered in Qatar continue to spread throughout the region. Experiments with elections as a means of selecting leaders continue to occur. High oil prices have produced an economic boom in many Arab countries, though not, of course, in all. But, with few exceptions, despite the propensity of the spindoctors here in DC to claim credit for anything positive that happens in the Middle East, these developments owe little to the state of US-Arab relations and have little impact one way or the other on American relations with the Islamic world.

Our relations with the Arabs and with Muslims generally are at a historic nadir. All of us, Americans or Arabs, who are present want to do something about this. But what? We must start with an honest appraisal of where we are.

My country's tragically misguided lurch into militarism after 9/11 has already cost us more on the broader international stage than anyone could have imagined. In the span of a single presidential term of office, four years, we have forfeited the international esteem that once undergirded our global influence. We have lost the admiring deference to our leadership of allies and friends alike, without gaining the respect of our enemies and adversaries. Once seen as the reliable champion of a generous and just international order based on the rule of law, the United States is now widely viewed as an inveterately selfish spoiler in international organizations and a scofflaw in international affairs. Once seen as the last, best hope of humankind, the United States is now -- according to many polls -- more feared than admired in a lengthening list of countries. We are much the weaker for all of this.

Nowhere is this dismaying reversal in foreign views of my country more advanced than in the Arab and Islamic worlds. The mutual estrangement of Arabs and Americans is driven by the

consequences of ill-considered US policies in Iraq, the Holy Land, Afghanistan, and at home. It is exacerbated by hypocrisy, irresponsible passivity, and an absence of forceful leadership on the Arab side. Adverse trends in American-Arab relations in turn poison American relationships with the broader world of Islam. Different policies and approaches on both sides will be needed to regain the enormous amount of common ground we have lost. More artful and articulate explanations for policies that are fundamentally mistaken will not do the trick.

The Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq has cost my country its international reputation, many lives, and hundreds of billions of borrowed dollars. It is severely eroding both the structure and the professional competence of our army. It has destroyed the Iraqi state and destabilized and desecularized Iraqi politics, while expanding the regional power and influence of Iran. It has catalyzed violent struggles, verging on civil war, between Iraqi Arabs and Kurds, between Arab Sunnis and Sh'ias, and among Shi'i factions. It has generated at least three separate but loosely coordinated insurgencies in Iraq. The occupation, which seemed like the solution, has become the problem.

Our occupation in Iraq is drawing youth from throughout the Islamic world into attacks on Americans, by some estimates multiplying our enemies ten-fold. By a process of Darwinian natural selection administered by the very competent officers and men of the US Army and Marines, we are creating an ever fitter cadre of enemies, expert in urban warfare, bomb building, and the military choreography of the ambush. We have transformed Iraq from a reliable supplier of oil to the US and other markets into an unreliable one. The Iraq conflict and its side effects have contributed to raising energy prices to levels that are beginning to take a serious toll on our economy.

Our inability to prevail on the battlefield in Iraq has underscored the limits of our military power and emboldened our enemies. Now Hurricane Katrina has shown how little we have learned about how to deal with the consequences of large-scale traumatic events. The suffering of New Orleans has earned us the pity of the world and the scorn of our enemies. It invites renewed attempts by extremists to mount spectacularly deadly attacks on our homeland.

I suspect that many, if not most leaders in the Arab world would privately agree with the very negative assessment of American intervention in Iraq that I have just given. Some, I know, have spoken candidly to our president about Iraq, Israel, and the parlous state of American relations with the broader Islamic world. Candor, not fawning evasion and the hypocritical concealment of sincere differences of opinion, is the mark of true friendship. And it is in that spirit that I say to our Arab friends here today, if you do not express your views and advocate your own interests, do not be surprised if they are insouciantly ignored and trampled upon. No one heeds the lion that does not roar but rolls over and plays dead as others cross his territory at will. And no one respects the dog that whines but seldom growls and never bites.

It is particularly important that our Arab friends speak candidly to us about Iraq and Iran. The best outcome still possible in Iraq, it now seems, is a Shia-dominated state with a largely autonomous southern region heavily influenced by Iran and a Kurdish region independent in all but name. Such an Iraq may or may not contain US garrisons and bases. The United States has

not clarified its intentions. No one has demanded that it do so. Some of the same people who neoconned the United States into invading Iraq are now arguing for an attack on Iran as a means of ensuring that it does not eventually acquire nuclear weapons. If these outcomes in Iraq and courses of action against Iran would serve the interests of the Arabs, then Arabs need only remain silent. If they would not serve Arab interests, as I believe they would not serve the interests of the United States, then Arabs must speak out to help the United States and the international community come up with alternatives to them that would better serve our interests, or suffer the consequences.

In Iraq, the problem is not now – if it ever was – weapons of mass destruction, bad government, or even terrorism; it is the occupation. The occupation generates the very phenomena it was intended to cure. In that respect, the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq has come to have much in common with the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. In Iraq, as in Palestine, ending the occupation is the prerequisite for reversing the growth of terrorism and restoring peace.

Not long ago, many Arabs took obvious pleasure in seeing a few thousand Israeli settlers in Gaza suffer the same sense of powerlessness and dispossession that hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have experienced over the years. It is all too easy to forget that the Israeli withdrawal was unilaterally imposed by the Israeli military on Israelis and Palestinians alike. It was not agreed with the Palestinians as part of a peace process and it has no clear implications for any other part of the occupied territories. It seems likely, in fact, that the people of Gaza have exchanged occupation by Israeli colonists and soldiers not for freedom but for a state of siege, in which their access to the outside world will continue to be controlled and perhaps severely restricted by their Israeli neighbors. Meanwhile, Mr. Sharon, having driven off on his own road, has made it clear that he has no intention of pulling the road map out of the glove compartment and using it to navigate. He gives every evidence of a firm intention to continue to impose rather than negotiate changes in Israel's relationship with its Palestinian captives.

The fact is, of course, that Israeli occupation and settlement of Arab lands is inherently violent. Occupations are acts of violence. The dispossession of people from their land is an act of violence. Preventing people from coming to and going from their own country is an act of violence. And as long as such Israeli violence against Palestinians continues, it is utterly unrealistic to expect that Palestinians will stand down from violent resistance and retaliation against Israelis. Mr. Sharon is far from a stupid man; he understands this. So, when he sets the complete absence of Palestinian violence as a precondition for implementing the road map or any other negotiating process, he is deliberately setting a precondition he knows can never be met.

As long as the United States continues unconditionally to provide the subsidies and political protection that make the Israeli occupation and the high-handed and self-defeating policies it engenders possible, there is little, if any, reason to hope that anything resembling the former peace process can be resurrected. Originally intended to provide a basis for trading land for peace, the occupation has itself become the problem. As long as it continues, neither Palestinians nor Israelis will have personal security. As long as it continues, Israel will not find the acceptance by its Arab neighbors that was offered at Beirut in 2002. Moreover, the violent confrontation could at any moment, as it did in the past, spread its murder and mayhem well

beyond the region. The most immediate victims of the continuing savagery and injustice in the Holy Land are, of course, Palestinians and Israelis. But their agony disturbs the peace of the world and wounds the hearts of billions beyond their borders.

The extremism and terrorism bred by the continuing injustices and crimes against humanity in the Holy Land thus continue to take their toll in places as remote from the Holy Land as Britain, Thailand, Nigeria, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, an American-led military operation to apprehend the perpetrators of 9/11 and to punish those Afghan Salafis who had given them shelter has now taken on a seemingly eternal life of its own. No one can now say when or what might allow the US to disengage from combat against the once discredited but now resurgent Taliban. As in Iraq and Israel, the occupation is becoming the cause of the very problems it was meant to resolve. If one recalls that the objective of al Qa`ida and its extremist ilk has been to drive the United States and the West from the Dar al Islam so that they can seize control of it, the growing antipathy to the American presence is sobering.

Finally, a couple of necessary observations about the American home front. I have recited a daunting list of policy challenges, not to say catastrophes, for the United States. We have a political system premised on the notion of competition between two parties – an adversary process in which one party criticizes and proposes alternatives to the policies of the other. This system has clearly broken down. Patriotism is confused with silent acquiescence in the policies proposed by our leaders. Policies that should be the subject of active debate are accepted without a word of protest by a gullible public. Those who know better say nothing even when they can see the country being led into disaster. The opposition party not only does not oppose, it does not propose alternatives either because it has no ideas or because lacks confidence in those it has been too timid to advance. This is not just a political problem; it is a systemic breakdown in American democracy.

What can and must be done in these circumstances? None of you would be here at this late hour of the day if you did not care deeply about the issues I have been discussing. I appeal to you. Those of you who are Arabs, lend us your ideas for how to lead ourselves out of the dilemmas we now face. Those of you who are American, speak out. Reaffirm your patriotism by restoring life to our democracy!

When the need for mutual understanding is greatest, the support for those who attempt to promote it paradoxically often seems to be least. Organizations like our hosts today, the National Council on US-Arab Relations, or the Middle East Institute and my own Middle East Policy Council, require ongoing financial support to continue our work. But such support has never been less generously given than now. Each of these organizations plays a different role in raising policy issues for public debate, in questioning the conventional wisdom, and in educating the American public to Middle East realities that would otherwise never come to their attention. There are clear divisions of labor and little duplication of effort amongst these and other organizations involved in Middle East affairs. I close with the plea that, if you care about a better informed American policy debate and about rebuilding US-Arab relations, you make a much-needed financial contribution to the National Council or another organization of your choice.

Thank you.