

Ambassador Ronald Neumann

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Yonah, thank you for the introduction and for the invitation. It is a particular pleasure to be here, not only with my friend Charlie Ray, but Ambassador Negroponte. I still remember the first time I met him. It was on a telephone when I had staggered back to my trailer in Iraq in Baghdad at about 11 o'clock at night. I was approaching the end of my short sojourn to help out Ambassador Bremmer, after which I was supposed to go back to my post in Bahrain. Ambassador Negroponte explains how wonderful an idea it would be if I would stay for another year as the political-military councilor. It shows you his capacity as a diplomat because I did. But he was a great ambassador and I didn't regret it.

Let me push on quickly because our time is limited. I always enjoy sessions where they say "We're really here to hear your opinion" and then they fill up your entire time with the speakers so that you might get a maximum of two questions in. We'll try to do better. I think in reflecting just very briefly on the state of American diplomacy, I think it's important to talk about two different, although overlapping, things. One is diplomacy in terms of policy, and the other is the conduct of policy, or how you get things done, which is the real area of diplomatic practice. On diplomacy as policy, I would say that we are not very good right now. I have three basic criticisms: we are too unilateral, we have conceptual problems of what directions we are going in, and in some cases we are incoherent.

We are overwhelmingly bilateral now in all our relations. There is an argument for that. There is an argument that sometimes you get things by being tougher, by pushing on individuals or countries. It is not completely without intellectual foundation, but essentially it is a very short-range approach which relies heavily upon beating people with a stick or threatening to beat them. We are particularly keen on using US unilateral instruments for things like sanctions. That has the debility over the long term that you build up resistance, which at some point in the future may come back to hit us. For example, the biggest questions goes beyond our policy toward Iran, but to how we are using our control of the banking system to force our on sanctions on countries that don't agree with us. This is deeply disliked by all of our major trading partners. They don't agree with our pulling out of the nuclear agreement in the first place. Now we are creating a situation in which there is an incentive to gradually begin to look for how to build other systems. How do you step out of the larger US financial control and major influence in the post-WWII institutions?

You've already seen a little of that. The Chinese put forward their idea for a development bank in Asia. We didn't like it. We wanted everyone to stay with the Asia Development Bank, and the result was that all of our major European colleagues ignored us and joined the Chinese bank anyways. Now you have these talks about setting up another financial system to bypass the SWIFT system. It's not going to happen fast, it may not happen at all, but it is symptomatic of the larger institutional breakdown which comes with being on this very short-term focus.

We seem to have a conceptual problem in terms of priorities. A lot of diplomacy is not about getting your priorities right but managing multiple priorities at the same time. When we're trying, as the administration is now, to organize resistance pressure on Venezuela, it doesn't seem to be the smartest moment to be going after Mexico on trade issues and narcotics. We are having multiple feuds at the same time we want people to support us. That is a conceptual problem of how one organizes for effectiveness.

Additionally, we have momentary periods of complete incoherence. I was just talking to a colleague on something to do with Libya the other day. He told me that basically, a large portion of our bureaucracy which deals with Libya is trying to avoid answering the telephone because, ever since president Trump's call to General Haftar, they don't know what the policy is. You can have an argument about whether the policy is good or bad. You can have an argument about whether it makes sense to support the UN process and the coalition government and whether that policy really has any chance of success. You can have that discussion, but to the best of my knowledge, we have not. We've had a telephone call from President Trump to the general who opposes the government we've been supporting. No one knows what it said or what its purpose was or where it is going. We are now incoherent in terms of advancing any policy because we can't describe it to anyone or get anyone to share it. It would be helpful if the senior leaders of the State Department and the White House could describe it to those inside the bureaucracy so that they might consider how they might share it.

But despite all these things, I would say life is not hopeless. When you get to the internal mechanisms, there are some positives to be said. On the side of personnel and administration, Mr. Tillerson is gone. I count that as a very strong positive because the gentleman did more damage to the institutions of our diplomacy in one year than I would have believed anyone would do in such a short period of time. His hiring freeze, kept in place for a year, caused all kinds of systemic distortions. This is kind of nerdy stuff, but here is one example. Due to the hiring freeze, when people left a position you could not move someone from another position even if they were already a State Department employee to a position where you needed them more. A special exemption was required and few were given. That policy was kept in place for a year during which people retired, people quit, and by the end there were all sorts of structural problems in the system. Then, even when the hiring freeze was lifted the Congress didn't give State enough money and positions to just fill all the empty positions. The hiring freeze is off but they can't put back all the people. So, now you take State has to take the money they have and the positions they are given and they try to allocate those across 50 odd bureaus and fill the priority positions. That is the kind of systemic problem that I am talking about which is hard to unwind.

By the way, the government shutdown made it worse. For instance, at the Foreign Service Institute, where they have a lot of contractors, they lost a lot. A certain number of them decided, 'I am going to go work for Defense where they can give me a paycheck,' and they didn't go back. But that is a problem that can be dealt with. The hiring freeze is over, recruitment is beginning to pick up, and those are good signs.

So this is not hopeless, it's just difficult. I would say that is true of policy too, and I will close on the note of one story. I remember that when I was the Deputy Chief of Mission in Abu Dhabi in 1987, shortly after I arrived, Washington made the decision to reflag Kuwaiti oil tankers and would escort them in the Persian Gulf notwithstanding the Irani desire to attack them. I remember when my Ambassador and I called on the acting Foreign Minister in Abu Dhabi to tell him we were going to begin the escort operation the following day. This was a difficult period. We had recently withdrawn the troops from Lebanon after the embassy bombings. And we had responded to democratic protests in the Philippines and turned away from President Marcos; a decision that, Arab Leaders saw as abandoning a friend. These action raised many questions about whether the US could be counted on. I remember the discussion when we made called on the Foreign Minister. He was very polite to us, as we told him that: "we are going to start the escort operation tomorrow." But it was very clear that he was in great doubt about how long we were going to be able to carry this out, and how long we were going to be able to show the will to maintain this. Well, we did keep it up. We had a small, undeclared war with Iran, and later the war with Iraq after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Then, US prestige came way back up again.

I am just reflecting on the Arab world, not the broader world, but I tell that story just to end on a little more uplifting note. Just because you are down now doesn't mean you stay down forever. And in fact, I would say that at the end of the Carter presidency, you had something similar. You had some real diplomatic successes in the Carter presidency with Panama, but overall in the Middle East there was a sense fairly broadly that the United States was unreliable and weak. Well, all it took was the election of Ronald Raegan to change signals. Whether you

liked the signals or not, is not the point. The point is that you can have one perception and you can move it.

That said, I do worry that if the perception of our unreliability grows among our allies, that it may not go away completely, even if we change policy later. I think we've now created a doubt that US policy lines, which were pretty much stable for 70 years, have been brought into doubt. Hence, even if we change back, it begs the question of whether we are dependable in the long run. That is a lingering doubt that we will have to deal with. But I just close on this note: we have been down this road before, and we've come back up so it is not necessarily impossible. That is the most positive I can be.