RETOOLING THE MIDDLE EASTERN FREEDOM AGENDA: ENGAGING ISLAM

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Post-mortems on the American democracy project in Iraq, and by extension the Bush administration’s freedom agenda in the Middle East, are in full swing. Authors are rushing into print with explanations of what went wrong in Iraq, most of them emphasizing lapses in U.S. military planning and execution. Books such as Thomas Ricks’ *Fiasco* typically argue that U.S. forces failed in their most fundamental mission—providing security for the new Iraqi democracy.¹

Few of the critics give Iraq’s government good odds of surviving, let alone leading that nation toward stable, liberal democracy. Indeed, in late summer 2006 Iraq seems on the precipice of confessional suicide, with Sunni and Shiite militias vying to destroy human life and property. Some 100 Iraqi civilians, many of them children, are dying each day at the hands of suicide bombers. Death squads compete in devising the most hideous methods of torture.

But pessimism is not limited to Iraq. Once hailed as a catalyst of democratic reform in autocratic Muslim nations, the American democracy project seems to its critics a time bomb that has finally exploded.² Islamist radicals have hidden elections to power in Palestine (Hamas) and to political influence in Egypt (Muslim Brotherhood). The Islamist political party Hezbollah has used its participation in Lebanese democracy as a cover for terrorism, its militias carving a virtual state within a state.

Meanwhile a viciously anti-Semitic Shiite clerical regime in Iran supports Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Shiite extremist Muqtada al Sadr in Iraq. Moreover, Iran seeks nuclear weapons while its elected president publicly associates nuclear Armageddon with the return of the Hidden Imam.³ On top of all this, and notwithstanding common cause against hated Israel, the electoral victories of Shiites in Iraq have reawakened across the Sunni Middle East a deeply-rooted fear that some experts believe will drive conflict there for the foreseeable future.⁴

Amid the fierce debate over the direction of the American democracy project, however, there is a striking omission that has implications for freedom and stability in the broader Middle East and for the national security of the United States. Neither the critics nor the defenders of administration policies seem interested in our failure to engage Islam directly, not in some broad “cul-

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¹ Thomas F. Farr
² The Review of Faith & International Affairs
³ Thomas F. Farr
⁴ The Review of Faith & International Affairs
tural” sense, but as a religion that drives the actions of individuals, groups, and nations.

Since its arrival in Iraq, for example, the United States has declined to engage that nation’s Islamist communities and political parties on religious, as well as secular, grounds. To be sure, neither the weaknesses of Iraqi democracy nor the emerging civil war are purely religious in character. Political institutions and economic growth are all critical to Iraq’s future, and Sunnis have varied reasons to fear minority status. But the actions of Iraqi Shiites in particular are heavily influenced by their religious beliefs, themselves often mediated by religious leaders such as the quietist Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani or the radical Muqtada al-Sadr. Most Shiite and Sunni political parties are practitioners of “political Islam.” They are led by Islamists—people who, in Graham Fuller’s neutral phrase, “believe that Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about politics and society” and are prepared to do something about it.

For better or worse, the forces of electoral democracy have been loosed in the Middle East, and long-term American policy had better adjust to the reality that Islamists, not secular autocrats, are going to determine the future of politics and of extremism. Traditional diplomacy will have its place, for example in gaining intelligence cooperation from autocratic allies or in influencing regimes that threaten our interests. And U.S. democracy programs will certainly need to be more effective in stimulating the secular elements of stability, especially economic growth and civil society. But America’s long term national security will increasingly turn on its ability to move religious actors toward peaceful and productive public purposes and away from extremism. Our goal should be stable, liberal, religion-friendly regimes that are at peace with their neighbors and that defuse the kind of faith-based rage that threatens civilization itself. To accomplish this, U.S. policy makers will need a better understanding of Islam and its variants, as well as a vocabulary to address the relationship between religious and civil authority and the benefits of liberal norms to Islam as a religion.

This is not a new problem in foreign policy. Questions about how to deal with the inconvenient fact that Islam is a religion have bedeviled the Bush administration since 9/11. Last year U.S. News and World Report noted a fragile consensus developing that would, among other things, fund U.S. programs to bolster moderate Islam. But significant obstacles were noted as well, including objections on constitutional grounds. According to U.S. News, “Some legal experts question whether America’s growing involvement with Islam is legal, given that American courts have found that America’s tax dollars may not be used to support religion.” In 1991, a constitutional law expert recalls, the American Civil Liberties Union won a case against the U.S. Agency for International Development to stop it from pursuing American interests by funding Catholic and Jewish schools overseas. Such a case today, he wistfully adds, seems unlikely.

ACLU litigators can rest easy for the time being. The disarray over religion in American diplomacy is so deeply rooted that the prospects of a concerted, effective effort to influence Islam are still dim. Concerns about “entanglement with religion” in international affairs have long been voiced within the foreign policy community and—when it comes to Islam—by many on the Christian right. A “knowledgeable official” quoted by U.S. News neatly sums up the supposed dilemma: “The Cold War was easy [because] it was a struggle against a godless political ideology. But [the clash of ideas within Islam] has theological elements. It goes to the core of American belief that we don’t mess with freedom of religion. Do we have any authority to influence this debate?”

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Does the United States have the “authority” to influence a debate which will affect its vital interests abroad, and its physical security at home, for decades to come? That such a question can even be posed—a full five years after 9/11 and three years after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein—reveals the profound confusion that has plagued our thinking about American national security and religious freedom. Whether Christian and secular fundamentalists like it or not, the reality is that Islam as a religion is a prime motivating force in the political, social, and economic behavior of more than a billion Muslim people worldwide. To understand the actions of Al Qaeda or the other Islamist terrorist organizations in purely secular terms is to misgauge the enemy and his staying power. To expect that U.S. policy can midwife durable Muslim democracies without systematic attention to the religious context is to indulge wishful thinking.

Religion and the Meaning of Freedom

Recent history suggests that opposition to any official American engagement with Islam qua religion will remain strong, both within the government and without. The reasons are varied, but they include a false “realism” that ignores the spiritual dimensions of human nature, a willful and unwise disrespect for Islam as a faith, and an aggressive secularism (often assumed by liberal internationalists) that misunderstands the nature and reach of religion itself. These disparate views converge in an official U.S. hesitancy to address the authentic and universal religious wellsprings of human behavior.

They also reflect a distorted and impoverished understanding of religious freedom, one that, as much as any other single factor, has paralyzed American foreign policy in its feeble attempts to deal with religion. U.S. News’ “knowledgeable official,” in asserting that “we don’t mess with freedom of religion,” doubtless has in mind the “wall of separation” between religion and politics that has come to represent religious liberty for many in the American political class. Under the consider-

able force of the separationist idea, religious freedom has been reduced to a privacy right. For strict separationists religion is little more than a therapeutic ritual that some people do in private, an activity that has, or ought to have, no real public policy significance.

The privatization model is less known in foreign than domestic affairs, but it is no less powerful. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, Bill Clinton applied it to U.S. foreign policy in a speech at Georgetown University. The problem revealed by 9/11, he said, is the danger to democracy posed by religious certainty. As historian Wilfred McClay put it, the lesson of the Al Qaeda attacks for many was that “religion is incorrigibly toxic…. If there still has to be a vestigial presence of religion here and there in the world, let it be kept private and tethered to a short leash.”

These views are, at best, ahistorical; at worst, they endanger American national security. Until the 1940s religious liberty was considered by most Americans as the cornerstone of a constitutional system in which religious people and communities were considered necessary to democracy—a fact noted by the French observer Alexis de Toqueville in the mid 19th century. Virtually no one in the founding generation, including theological liberals such as Jefferson or Franklin, understood religion as an exclusively private matter. Each accepted religion’s vital public role in American democracy, and believed that men and nations owed an obligation to God. The constitution written and ratified by their generation was designed to ensure that religiously motivated people involve themselves and their beliefs in political life, freed to do so by carefully crafted boundaries (no religious test for office; no establishment of religion, i.e. no legal or financial privileges for particular denominations; no government constraints on the free exercise of religion). Religion and state were firmly differentiated, to be sure. But their respective authorities overlapped, and under the American system could not be separated.

University of Chicago law professor Philip Hamburger, Library of Congress historian James H. Hutson, American University
historian Daniel Driesbach and others have amply demonstrated that the religious liberty established by James Madison and the founding generation manifestly did not represent a “wall of separation between church and state.” According to Hamburger the notion of absolute separation was seen as “an old, anticalerical and, increasingly, anti-ecclesiastical conception of the relationship between church and state.” The phrase occurs nowhere in the U.S. Constitution, and entered American jurisprudence only in 1947, when the Supreme Court plucked it from an obscure 1802 Thomas Jefferson letter. Since then, the “wall” has been increasingly employed not to differentiate between church and state in a way that protects and nourishes the religious components of American democracy, but to privatize and relativize religion.

This distorted understanding of religious freedom is rejected by most conservative Christians, many of whom have been loudly critical of its effects on American politics and public morality. Too many of these same Christians, however, have been unwilling to acknowledge the implications of separationism in U.S. foreign policy as it addresses the Muslim world. Some doubtless view Islam as religiously evil. But where can such views lead American policy, other than some sort of military containment strategy? That is hardly a realistic approach to addressing the religiously motivated behavior of 1.3 billion people in over 50 countries, many of them vital to U.S. interests. Several million also happen to be American citizens. Furthermore, it took centuries for a Christian understanding of religious freedom to develop. While there are major issues to be addressed by Muslims (especially the relationship between divine law and human freedom in the political sphere), it would be self-defeating to assume Islam incapable of the kind of doctrinal development experienced in Christian history.

Christians also point out quite accurately that many Muslim governments persecute Christian minorities, and insist that U.S. policy denounce such governments and demand the release of religious prisoners. This approach is worthy because it reflects America’s humanitarian values; few at the State Department disagree with it, so long as it doesn’t get in the way of other more strategic priorities. However, it is also mainly reactive in nature, and does little to attack the root causes of persecution. It fails to integrate the issue of religious freedom into larger American interests, such as encouraging stable transitions to democracy or ensuring that democracies are durable.

Unfortunately, the unholy combination of modern liberal and conservative bias has crippled internal U.S. discussion about influencing political reform in the Muslim world. No democratic Islamic political philosophy or practice can possibly develop on the premise that religion is a private matter, separate from the function of politics. Nor will the goal of stable democracy be furthered by a belief that Islam is theologically flawed and inherently persecutory. So long as American foreign policy cannot deal realistically and respectfully with Islam as a religion, it will be perceived in the Muslim world as fundamentally anti-Islamic.

If the United States is to be successful in winning the war against Islamist terror and in fostering lasting democratic political reform in the Middle East, it must find ways to encourage the emergence of an Islamic public theology supportive of liberal norms. America’s long-term goal must be democratic regimes in the Middle East grounded in Islamic forms of religious liberty. This liberty must be defined not as a mere humanitarian concession but as a political organizing principle compatible with, indeed required by, Islamic theology. But before American diplomacy can contribute to such an important, high-stakes venture, it must address some of its recent failures and rid itself of this liberty must be defined not as a mere humanitarian concession but as a political organizing principle compatible with, indeed required by, Islamic theology.
of some bad habits. Most importantly, it must integrate the policy of promoting religious freedom into its institutions and agendas, elevating it from the backwaters of human rights advocacy to the center of national security strategy.

A Learned Repugnance to Religion

In 1994 a book entitled Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft argued that American foreign policy was impaired by a “learned repugnance to contend intellectually” with religion. This willful blindness had contributed to a number of failures in American foreign policy, perhaps most notably in the Shiite Iranian revolution of 1979. Most U.S. policy makers refused until the end to believe that a religious leader or a religious doctrine could overthrow the Shah, and viewed developments on the ground only in classic “realist” terms. When a lone CIA analysis posited a religious basis for the Iranian opposition, it was contemptuously dismissed as “sociology.” This secularistic bias appeared to be challenged by the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom (IRF) Act, which mandated the promotion of religious freedom as part of U.S. foreign policy. Here, it seemed, was an initiative that would focus on the relationship between religion and politics in nations vital to U.S. interests. Many of those nations had strong and influential religious communities, and were struggling with the balance between religion and state. This was a critical problem in Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon, and Pakistan, but it was a major part of the political landscape in key non-Muslim countries as well, such as Russia, India, and China.

Unfortunately, U.S. foreign policy, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, continued to understand and address international affairs largely in secular terms, refusing to acknowledge religion as a factor requiring direct and immediate attention. This secularistic myopia has been candidly admitted in a recent book by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Perhaps the most egregious example was the State Department’s anemic implementation of the IRF Act. The policy was pigeonholed at State because few senior officials believed advancing religious freedom had much to do with the larger imperatives of foreign policy. Most viewed it as a humanitarian issue.

But in fact the IRF Act offered both the opportunity and the means to promote religious liberty in a way that could contribute to a policy of encouraging stable, liberal governance. It established a high-level position (an Ambassador at Large) to head the office of international religious freedom within the Department, and designated the Ambassador as “advisor to the President and Secretary of State.” On paper the new official was given considerable authority to “advance religious freedom worldwide” and a variety of tools to do it.

For example, the IRF Ambassador was authorized to negotiate with foreign governments, represent the United States in international organizations, and assist the Secretary in producing an annual report that not only analyzed the status of religious liberty in every country in the world, but explained U.S. policy in addressing those issues that existed in each. With the Ambassador’s recommendations, the President would be required annually to designate the worst violators, and to take some action to remedy the problem. Those actions could include punitive sanctions, but they could also be paired with positive incentives, such as programs to help religious communities discern the benefits of democratic norms, including religious freedom, for their respective traditions.

But neither the Ambassador’s title nor his legal authority altered the official resistance to addressing religion systematically in American foreign policy. From the beginning, the Ambassador and his office were placed under the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL). While staffed by talented and dedicated people, unfortunately DRL carries little policy influence at State and is generally shunned by Foreign Service Officers as “out of the mainstream” of foreign policy. Few FSOs oppose human rights advocacy per se, but they tend to see it as a compartmentalized issue that
has little connection to the diplomacy practiced in the powerhouse offices at State—the regional bureaus and desks that control American embassies and consulates abroad.

As a result of their placement under DRL, IRF Ambassadors at Large to date have been subordinates of DRL assistant secretaries, even though assistant secretaries are lower in State’s pecking order than Ambassadors at Large. In other words, the State Department, mandated by Congress to create a general’s position, has put the “general” under a colonel’s supervision. That, quite naturally, is clear to those within the Department who would otherwise be peers of the IRF Ambassador. The annual report on religious freedom was until last year under the control of DRL, not the IRF Ambassador. While the report has earned plaudits and had a salutary effect on awareness of religious persecution within the Foreign Service, it has not been used as an effective policy tool.

The current IRF Ambassador has had some recent successes. For example, he won the designation of both Saudi Arabia and Vietnam as among the worst violators of religious freedom (“countries of particular concern,” or CPCs, in IRF Act parlance), two actions that had long been resisted by senior policy makers at State. More importantly, he has for the first time since the passage of the IRF Act used the CPC designation as more than an empty denunciation, and has put it into play in bilateral negotiations.

These initiatives are all the more remarkable given that he has not had the regular access to senior policy officials that others of equal rank (such as the Ambassador at Large for War Crimes) enjoy. He is not a part of senior staff meetings and is an “advisor” to the President or Secretary in name only. In fact, the IRF Ambassador at Large and his office have had no significant role in molding broader U.S. foreign policy, especially in the Muslim world, but also in critical countries like China, Russia, and India.

The bureaucratic and functional quarantine of international religious freedom policy has been no secret in Washington. Among other things, the problem was publicly revealed in a 2003 report of the State Department’s Inspector General, which bluntly concluded that “the current structure that places the congressionally mandated office of the [IRF] Ambassador at Large within DRL is at odds with the Department’s organizational guidelines and has proved to be unworkable. As a consequence, the purposes for which the religious freedom function was created are not being adequately served.”

But neither Congress nor the coalition that supported the IRF Act has seen fit to address the issue. A separate IRF Commission, established by the Act as a watchdog agency, has made some good recommendations, many of them ignored. But the Commission itself has largely ignored the Department’s bureaucratic isolation of IRF policy and the office of international religious freedom.

The Triumph of Separationism

The most compelling test of official America’s reluctance to engage religion as a foreign policy issue came with the attacks of September 11, 2001. With the threat of Al Qaeda and Islamist terrorism bearing down on U.S. security interests, American diplomacy seemed to have little choice but to “contend intellectually” with Islam. What was it, those responsible for U.S. foreign policy surely would ask, that led a tiny Muslim minority to draw with such lethal effect on certain tenets of their religion, and what should the U.S. do about it? Why did hundreds of thousands of Muslims around the world not rush into the streets to condemn the terrorists’ profanation of Islam as they did Danish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad? Does Islam
encourage violence? Is it, or can it become, compatible with durable, liberal democracy?

The answers to these and other questions continue to be debated. But—almost eight years since the passage of the IRF Act—it is clear that separationism and privatization are still powerful forces in U.S. foreign policy circles. That America’s policy of promoting religious freedom might play a role in dealing with Islamist terrorism has simply not registered.

For example, the 9/11 Commission Report, after an extended analysis of the religious roots of Islamist extremism, simply punted when it came to the question of whether and how the State Department should address the religious aspects of terror: “Lives guided by religious faith, including literal beliefs in holy scriptures, are common to every religion and represent no threat to us.”

It is indeed important to reassure Muslims that the war on terror is not a war on Islam. But religious faith cannot remain unaddressed by American foreign policy if components of that faith, however distorted by madmen, provide the context for a fundamental threat to American national security.

And yet until very recently that is precisely what the State Department has done: leave the issue unaddressed. In a 2004 Congressional hearing on the State Department’s strategy in dealing with Islamist terrorism, eight senior Department officials testified. These eight men and women represented the diplomatic expertise deemed relevant to the question at hand. The IRF Ambassador was not one of them. As the eight testified over the course of several hours, none discussed the issue of Islam as religion in any substantive way. None considered the importance of religious freedom, notwithstanding the nation’s legally mandated policy of promoting international religious freedom. Clearly no one at State saw any policy connection between IRF policy and the issue of Islamist extremism.

The Way Forward

A few years ago the Journal of Democracy published an insightful article by Columbia University political scientist Alfred Stepan, who argued that the core religio-political characteristic of successful democracies was neither separation of religion and state, nor secularism, but the negotiation of a political compact that he dubbed “the twin tolerations.” This compact, which must constantly be renegotiated as societies change, encompasses a culture-specific agreement on “the necessary boundaries of freedom for elected governments from religious groups, and for religious individuals and groups from government.” Successful democratic boundaries will forbid any religious community from mandating public policy to democratically elected governments, but will permit religious individuals and groups “to advance their values publicly in civil society and to sponsor organizations and movements in political society.”

In countries where religious communities play a significant role in public life, such as 18th-century America, 20th-century India, South Korea, Chile, or most 21st-century Muslim-majority nations, the transition to democracy and the twin tolerations requires debate within religious communities. These debates normally take place in the context of religious doctrine rather than on secular or separationist grounds. As Stepan puts it, religious believers will only be convinced by arguments “deeply embedded in their own religious community’s comprehensive doctrine.” Moreover, “in polities where a significant portion of believers may be under the sway of a doctrinally based nondemocratic religious discourse, one of the major tasks of political and spiritual leaders who wish to revalue democratic norms in their own religious community will be to advance theologically convincing public arguments” that democracy is compatible with, or supportive of, their religious tradition.

The primary agents of this debate in the Muslim world are the Islamists. While there has been discussion within the U.S. government over whether and how to engage Islamists that are open to democracy, such as Egypt’s Hizb al-Wasat, that debate has thus far yielded no significant policy change. The default separationist position—that we must avoid the Islamists and support secularists—has largely
prevailed in our private and public diplomacy, and in our democracy program spending. But if durable democracy is to root itself in Muslim countries and not regress into either secular or theocratic authoritarian regimes, American diplomacy must begin systematically to engage and support those Islamists open to liberal democratic institutions and norms.

There is, of course, no magic formula for achieving this goal. Nor are the views of the United States likely to be easily embraced by Muslims. Many will see any official U.S. involvement in Islamic conversations as a Trojan horse designed to undermine Islam. Our European allies (and some in the United States) are sure to ridicule any such effort as at best a waste of time and at worst a damaging spur to Islamist activism.

Indeed the argument is heard in official circles that “adding religion to the mix in the Middle East” needlessly complicates an already complex situation. But that argument is like saying “adding gasoline to the mix” needlessly complicates the running of the internal combustion engine. It may be volatile, but to ignore its role is to ensure failure. Conceding both the volatility and the critical nature of the role of religion in the Muslim world, one can suggest five concrete changes to American policy. They are by no means exhaustive and will engender opposition if proposed, let alone adopted. But they illustrate the kind of corner that must be turned in American diplomacy.

1. Refocus U.S. IRF policy on developing the “twin tolerations.”

This will require some “top down” decisions at Foggy Bottom and increased Congressional involvement. The IRF Ambassador should be given the authority within State that the law already provides. The IRF office should expand on the current Ambassador’s activities and begin private negotiations with Muslim governments over policy changes that could accelerate political reform, including reform supported by moderate Islamists. He and others within the U.S. foreign policy establishment should increase our anemic dialogue with reform-minded Muslim scholars, jurists, and Islamists, and not simply those that are currently friendly to the United States or are “secular” in orientation. Public diplomacy programs should reflect this shift as well.

2. Support NGOs that seek to engage Muslim communities on how liberal political reform can be compatible with Islam.

Last year a delegation of Iranian religious scholars and clerics came to Washington for a week’s exchange of ideas. The discussions were remarkably candid and focused on, among other things, the Iranian suspicion of liberal democracy, their insistence that Iran was a model of Islamic democracy, and that the “guardianship of theologians” (12 clerics who vet parliamentary candidates for religious orthodoxy) is required by Shiite Islam. But the delegation also listened intently to presentations by American experts, Muslim and non-Muslim, that suggested alternative understandings of freedom compatible with Islam. This dialogue was the third in a series begun in 2001. Although invited, the Department of State chose not to attend most of these sessions, which were likely considered “below the radar” of national priorities in U.S. relations with a country that sponsors terrorism and seeks nuclear weapons. This is shortsightedness with a vengeance. The United States must do all it can in countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to encourage reformist thinking.

3. Incorporate religious communities in U.S.-funded democracy programs, including “civil society” programs.

A perusal of U.S. funded democracy programs reveals scores of millions of dollars being spent on the conduct of elections, building political parties, drafting constitutions, training journalists, developing women’s and labor movements, and growing various aspects of civil society—the intermediary associations that can limit the powers of government, build democratic virtues, and increase social cohesion. Yet these programs do not yet focus sufficiently on the most important aspect of civil society in Muslim nations: religious communities.
4. Encourage existing and new interreligious dialogue.

The United States should officially encourage non-Muslim religious communities to engage in dialogue with their Muslim counterparts, whether in-country or across national boundaries. A good example of this dialogue is between the Roman Catholic Church and various Islamic authorities, including those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Pope John Paul II made this a significant part of his pontificate, and Pope Benedict XVI has shown some openness to continuing it. American diplomacy should, behind the scenes, offer its support to this and other similar efforts by Eastern Orthodox, evangelical Christian, and non-Christian religious communities.

5. Establish an Islamic Institute of American Studies.

When the Roman Catholic Church embraced religious freedom, one of the major contributors to the development of Catholic doctrine was an American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray. Murray’s views on religious liberty were not only drawn from Catholic theology, but also filtered through the Catholic experience of religious liberty in America. While American Muslims have complaints about their treatment since 9/11, most will readily admit that they enjoy more religious freedom in America than Muslims anywhere else in the world. A well-funded institute of higher learning—staffed, administered, and run by American Muslims but bringing to the United States the best theologians and jurists of the Islamic world—could help Islam find its John Courtney Murray(s).

At a minimum, it would begin to expose the debate now ongoing within Islam to the experience of American Muslims. None of these suggestions, of course, is fool-proof. But the height of folly would be to continue on America’s current course of inertia when it comes to religion and foreign policy. We, of all peoples, should know better.


7. See the text of President Clinton’s November 2001 speech at www.georgetown.edu.


