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Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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Speech of Senator Mike Mansfield (D., Montana)

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REVIEW OF FOREIGN POLICY - IV

A Constructive Policy in the Middle East

Mr. President:

Last January I began a series of discussions in the Senate on various aspects of the international situation. I have since outlined the issues, as I understand the issues, which confront us in Southeast Asia and in the North African crisis.

When I began these discussions last January, I stated:

"If the national interest requires us to rise above political considerations in matters of foreign policy, it also requires us to undertake a vigorous review of that policy. It requires us to make an unremitting search for facts and ideas which may guide us in dealing with difficulties abroad."

The need for constant Senate review of policy is nowhere more clearly evident than in connection with the Middle East. There is universal recognition of the real and imminent danger of war in that part of the world. Skirmishes are taking place along the borders of Israel and even air duels have been fought.

The President and the Secretary of State have repeatedly made clear the deep concern of the United States over these trends towards all-out conflict. Additional Marines and a division of destroyers have been sent to the Mediterranean, and elements of the United States 6th Fleet are even now patrolling off Israeli and Arab ports.
I do not question either the concern or the actions of the Executive Branch in this matter. What disturbs me, however, is that they relate to a situation whose significance is little understood in this country. Yet the need for public understanding is very great. It is even more; it is absolutely essential, if there is to be public acceptance and support of policies which will serve the totality of American interests in the Middle East.

When we speak of the Middle East, we are speaking of one of the decisive political regions of the world. It ranks among the great crossroads of the earth, providing passage by land, sea and air between Europe, Asia and Africa. Today, the Middle East is emerging from a sweeping political transition. At the close of World War I, the region was transferred from Turkish authority into the hands of Great Britain and France. In turn, European political control, weakened by World War II, has now virtually disappeared. Where that control has not been withdrawn willingly, it has been forced out by the rising tides of militant nationalism and popular unrest.

France has gone completely from the area. British power remains at Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean. The British also maintain a tenuous foothold in Aden at the base of the Arabian peninsula and in a group of small sheikdoms along the Persian Gulf.

In place of European domination in the Middle East, there have emerged a number of independent states. These include the Jewish homeland of Israel and the Arab countries of Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen and Saudi-Arabia. On the political spectrum, the new states range from Western-type democracy to absolute monarchy.
There is great wealth for a few in the Middle East. For the many, however, life is a grim struggle against natural and man-made elements for the barest subsistence. The wealth comes from inequitable economic systems. It also comes from petroleum; much of the region floats on a sea of oil containing perhaps two-thirds of the world’s resources in this vital source of power. The Western companies drill it and pay enormous royalties for the privilege, only a trickle of which filters down to the impoverished people.

Mr. President, a far-reaching political transition in a setting of this kind can hardly take place without shock and dislocation. The lid of external restraint cannot be removed from over 40 million diverse people without a dangerous boiling over of the ambitions, the angers, and the rivalries which the lid has long held submerged.

It is not surprising, then, that the threat of full-scale conflict between Israel and the Arab States hangs over the Middle East. It is not surprising that a bitter anti-westernism seethes through much of the region. It is not surprising that obscure rivalries pulsate beneath the apparent unity of the Arab States as they vie with one another for leadership. It is not surprising that the restless millions throughout the area can be led to strike out first in one direction and then in another in their blind and incomprehending fury against the burden of poverty and exploitation which they have carried for so long.

We cannot stop these churning forces in the Middle East. But what this country does or does not do will have a profound impact on the situation in the Middle East. Our policies will either ease or intensify the present tensions. Our policies will either contribute to the impending explosion or act to prevent it.
It seems to me, however, that before we do anything we need to have clearly in mind what our interests are in that area. Only on that basis can we hope to build an intelligible and acceptable policy, a constructive policy for the American people to pursue.

Our direct economic interests in the Middle East are substantial. American business holds petroleum concessions of great potential value in that area. Americans have invested more than a billion dollars in these undertakings. The air and sea routes that pass through the region are also of considerable importance to our commerce.

In the event of war, access to these routes and even to land passages in the Middle East would be of great significance. It is conceivable, too, that our air base concession at Dhara in Saudi-Arabia might also be useful in wartime. We should bear in mind, however, that the utility of that base is already sharply restricted by the government of Saudi-Arabia and there is no assurance that the concession which expires shortly will be continued.

The United States also has a human interest in the Middle Eastern people. It has been expressed in our contribution to the U. N. relief program for the Arab refugees. It has been expressed in assistance of various kinds to the Arab States and to Israel totalling half a billion dollars.

The human interest of the United States in the Middle East extends to both Arabs and Israelis. In the case of the Arabs it goes back many decades to the work of religious and educational foundations which have long been active in the region. These early influences still permeate the policies of this country.
With respect to the Israelis, our concern is of more recent origin but it is nonetheless important. This country supported the re-creation of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East. We were the first to recognize the new state of Israel in 1948.

It has sometimes been said that we have favored in our policies Arab over Jew or Jew over Arab. We may well have differentiated at times between governments which we believed were working towards peace or against peace in the Middle East and I hope that we shall continue to do so. That differentiation should not apply, however, to the common people of the Middle East; they are all -- Arab and Jew alike -- caught up in the same gathering web of tragedy.

We have not become so callous to the brutality of this era of history that we are indifferent to the threatened religious war in the Middle East. We will not acquiesce, nor will decent mankind acquiesce, in the senseless slaughter of thousands of innocent people whether they be Jews or Arabs.

If I may sum up, then, our interests in the Middle East are of considerable extent and importance. They are not in themselves, however, sufficient to explain the deep concern of the United States in this region. They do not begin to measure the full scope of the importance of the Middle East to this country.

There are other interests, derivative interests, but nonetheless real and vital interests. For years now, the United States has been closely linked with other nations in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Far from being a burden as some have contended, these ties have kept the cost of the national
defense of the United States within the bounds of the possible. I go further. In my opinion these ties have forestalled the outbreak of World War III.

During the last year, however, the cement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has steadily crumbled. NATO has shown signs of decline. It may well be that it is disintegrating faster than the threat which brought it into being is subsiding. That such is the case is clearly evident in the recent request of Iceland that we withdraw our forces from the island. It is evident in the growing antagonism between Greece and Turkey. It is evident in the inability to find a satisfactory solution to the Cyprus question.

Let me make this point clear, Mr. President. I am not suggesting by these observations that NATO or any commitment or policy of this country should be clothed in an inflexibility which admits of no alteration. We must always be prepared to make changes to meet changing circumstances. What disturbs me, however, is the erosion of NATO. The organization has not changed very much outwardly but I believe it has nevertheless changed in the sense that it has lost its spirit, its drive, its leadership.

If that is already the case, then what further damage will be done to the organization by the crisis in the Middle East? Could this pillar of peace hold together in the event of a war, even a local war, in that area? What would be the effect of such a war on the unresolved problems of the eastern wing of NATO, on Greece, Turkey, and Britain?

And what would be the impact of violence and chaos in the Middle East on the Western European members? Only recently recovered from World
War II, they would face the loss of petroleum sources in the Middle East on which their present economic stability heavily depends. Would they not be catapulted into a desperate rivalry among themselves which would make a mockery of European unity? It is not without significance in this connection that recent Russian trade overtures to Western Europe have contained hints of growing sources of petroleum for export in the Soviet bloc.

Mr. President, I do not wish to labor the point. I believe it is clear what a conflict in the Middle East would do to NATO. It would tear it apart.

Nor would the difficulties end at that point. Old and new forms of totalitarianism would stalk the ruins of war in the Middle East. They would look beyond the Arab world. Opening before the eyes of would-be conquerors would be the vast Moslem community which extends from the Atlantic coast of North Africa through central and southern Asia as far as Indonesia and the southern Philippines in the Pacific, a community of 800 million. Could we stand by idly in these circumstances? Could others?

The problem which confronts us in the Middle East, then, is greater than the saving of American oil concessions, routes of passage, or air bases, however important any or all of these may be. It is greater than human sympathy for Arabs or Jews, however deeply and sincerely we may feel that sympathy. The real dimension of the problem in the last analysis is the preservation of the foundations of world peace with all that implies for us and other nations in a nuclear age.
The simple fact appears to be that we cannot afford to permit a major conflict to take place in the Middle East. The Western European nations cannot afford it. In the last analysis, it is even possible that the Russians cannot afford it.

It is one thing for them to play the ancient game of arms-traffic diplomacy, when the danger of self-entrapment is remote. It is another when the game threatens to touch off fires beyond control, fires which may spread and fuse into a world-wide conflagration from which the Soviet Union along with others will find no escape.

That moment may be fast approaching. The time to curb the fires may be soon or never. I do not know what course the Russians will now take. One can only hope that they will see the danger, as others have seen it, in the political merchandising of armaments in the Middle East.

Regardless of what the Russians do or do not do, however, it seems to me that it is essential for this country to have a clear understanding of where we ourselves are headed in the Middle East. It is essential that we have a constructive policy which will enable us to get there.

Neither a clear understanding nor a constructive policy is possible without an answer to a fundamental question. I cannot answer it. Other Senators cannot answer it. The Congress cannot answer it. The American people individually cannot answer it. Only the President, on behalf of all the people, can answer it.
The question is basic. It is simply this: Is the preservation of peace in the Middle East of vital importance to the interests of the United States?

I have tried to indicate some of the factors which must go into the answer. Others have done the same. The President alone, however, is in the position to lead in this matter. He alone can weigh all the factors.

Because this question has yet to be answered, clearly and unequivocally, our policies have faltered in the Middle East. We have dabbled in Cyprus while seeking to placate all sides. We have gingerly touched the edges of the Baghdad Pact. We have preached generalities on peace to Arab and Israeli while the war clouds have gathered. We have come close to a servile appeasement of arrogance in at least one instance in our desire to preserve peace. We have called on the United Nations for action but have not defined what we mean by actions. We have approved the mission of the Secretary-General.

Time is running short to alter the dangerous and futile indecision which has plagued our Middle Eastern policies. I believe the trend towards war in the Middle East can still be halted. It can be halted only if there is a clear understanding of what must be done to preserve peace in that region and only if there is the courage and the leadership to do it.

Peace in the Middle East has two facets. On the one hand, there can be no durable peace unless the tensions which threaten are relaxed and ultimately dissolved. In this connection, a stable and lasting peace will
require a genuine political settlement, not merely a truce, between the Arab States and Israel. It will require the correction of ancient social and economic inequities in the Middle Eastern states. It will require the development of responsible government where presently there is little or none. It will require the determined use of modern skills and technical knowledge in an effort to turn empty deserts into fruitful healthy lands -- as Iraq is now doing -- which can sustain the millions of Middle Eastern peoples. It will require a growing unity among the states of the Middle East, a unity aimed at constructive mutual ends rather than political manipulation and domination.

These changes may seem impossible to achieve. Yet in time they must be achieved. Unless they are, there will be no peace in the Middle East except one imposed from outside the region. Mr. President, I have not pointed out anything new in citing those long-range problems of stability in the Middle East. They are well-known and they have been widely discussed. Many of our past policies have consisted of a groping for ways to assist in dealing with them.

As I have noted, however, peace in the Middle East has not one but two parts. It consists of these long-range problems but it also has an immediate aspect. The immediate aspect is to provide a margin of time, a chance to deal with the long-range problems. It is precisely this margin of time, this chance, which is threatened by the present crisis between Israel and Egypt. Even if this crisis should pass, there are likely to be others, unless further steps are taken to forestall them.