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Foreign Policy and the 2016 Election
CAP Action Fund
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Thank you for that kind introduction and good morning to you all.

It is always a pleasure to visit the home of the Center for American Progress and the CAP Action Fund, because this building houses an all-star team of brilliant people with creative minds and practical skills.

Over the past decade, you have fashioned CAP into a treasure trove of information that thought leaders, journalists, and policymakers can turn to and trust.

But more importantly, this institution has become a powerful voice on behalf of Americans who want our country to be strong and respected, confident and just.

CAP was not created to re-fight the stale political wars of the past; its orientation has always been toward the future.

Yet its purpose today is much the same as it was when it was founded in 2003 – to bring Americans together on behalf of policies that will bring out the best in our country, both here at home and overseas.

I mention this context because it feeds directly into the topic I want to address today – the 2016 election and the question of which party is best positioned to keep our country safe and moving forward in the world.

I should say at the outset that I have some hesitation about weighing in on matters of politics and foreign policy.

For although I have been involved in many campaigns, when I was secretary of state I used to tell people that I had all my partisan political instincts surgically removed.

I have also developed close relationships with many prominent Republicans, including the unlikely friendship I struck up with Jesse Helms when I was UN ambassador and he was chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Senator Helms and I disagreed on pretty much everything, but we grew to trust and respect each other. And although it may seem old-fashioned, I still believe that for our democracy to function, our leaders must be capable of forging such relationships across the aisle.

So in some ways it would be natural for me to stay on the sidelines of this campaign, but I have chosen to be involved for two reasons.

First, I am concerned that there is growing skepticism within the American public about the benefits of U.S. engagement in the world, and I see it as my duty to speak up during this election season about why America must stay involved globally.

Second, I believe that Democrats have an historic opportunity to win even broader support for a conception of American security that stays true to our interests and ideals – a progressive-minded internationalism that follows in the best traditions of FDR and Harry Truman.

The country saw our approach on display this week at the debate in Las Vegas, where the Democratic candidates engaged in a remarkably substantive discussion of the issues – including the question of America’s role in the world.

The day following the debate I had the opportunity to talk to voters in Iowa, where I was campaigning in support of Hillary Clinton. It was clear to me that they found it refreshing to watch a civil conversation take place instead of the screaming matches we have seen on the other side.

So even though the general election is many months away, the contrast between the two parties is already well-established.

One party has remained true to its best traditions – the other is becoming lost in the wilderness after making too many right hand turns.

For voters, this has created a choice between a Democratic party that does battle against joblessness at home and terrorists abroad – and a Republican leadership in Congress that sees no greater threat to our future than Planned Parenthood.

When voters look to Democrats, they see pragmatists who offer solutions to new challenges such as climate change. When they look at today’s Republicans, they see leaders who still think the best way forward is to deny science.

When voters look to Democrats, they see smart strategists who support the use of diplomacy backed by force. When they look at Republicans, they see candidates who believe that military force is the only tool in the toolbox.

Of course, the differences between the two parties on issues of national security is not just a matter of theoretical debate – it has been on vivid display in recent times.

During the eight years Republicans were in the White House, we saw intelligence misused, professional diplomats and the uniformed military ignored, and the role of history and culture in shaping events disregarded.

We saw policymakers who relied on wishful thinking instead of critical thinking, and who forgot the true sources of our nation’s strength.

We saw leaders who were so thoughtless in deploying American power that they ended up exposing its limits to the world, weakening our position in every critical region.

So under Republicans we had a series of unforced strategic errors during the first decade of this century – and America is still recovering from those mistakes.

Yet the Republican candidates for president are eager for the public to overlook this record, and keen to blame all of the world's ills on the “Obama-Clinton” foreign policy.

But we remember that, upon taking office, President Obama inherited an incredible mess, including two hot wars, a broken Middle East, the biggest international economic crisis since the Great Depression, and American prestige at a lower level than at any time since the Vietnam War.

No president has a magic wand, but Barack Obama has put us firmly back on the correct track.

He has rebuilt and strengthened our economy, pursued terrorists relentlessly, reduced the burden on our military, and restored proper balance to U.S. foreign policy – emphasizing not only defense but also diplomacy, development, and democratic principles as well.

Although the world remains a dangerous place, the United States is now on its strongest footing since President Clinton left office, both at home and abroad.

Thanks in great measure to the efforts of Secretary Clinton, we have restored America's reputation after years of grave damage in the wake of Iraq.

We have strengthened our position in Asia, and built stronger relationships with India and Japan.

We successfully negotiated a bold diplomatic agreement with Iran, one that prevents them from obtaining a nuclear weapon and avoids plunging us into another war in a chaotic Middle East.

We have deployed smart power and placed a greater emphasis on technology, public-private partnerships, economics and energy, and people-to-people ties in global engagements.

The question voters will face next year is whether to build on this record of progress, or take a giant leap back to the policies of the previous decade.

To win, Democrats must punch back with the truth against those who distort the record of our administration and our party.

But we must also make an affirmative case for why we should be entrusted with this country's security, and explain how our party's policies are best suited to handle global challenges in a world that is far different from what it was in 2008, or even 2012.

As part of that effort, we must take into account what I call the Iraq effect.

By that I mean the creeping sense that America can do little good in the world, and that efforts to shape events abroad through diplomatic, economic or military means are futile.

It is understandable that Americans are reluctant to spend time and money solving problems overseas when those problems seem intractable, and we face many difficult issues here at home.

But as tempting as it may be, simply circling the wagons is not an option for the United States.

For history teaches us that sooner or later, the world's problems will come home to America.

While the Bush administration made grievous errors, and the Obama administration has not solved every problem, we cannot use those experiences as an excuse to retreat overseas.

When you serve as secretary of state, you are reminded constantly that the world still sees America as a role model.

Our leadership rests on our commitment to democracy, liberty and law, support for justice and peace, and advocacy of human rights and economic opportunity for all.

For us to have credibility abroad, these concepts must be constantly upheld and reinforced at home.

And for Americans to live our lives in safety and freedom, we must be prepared to deploy all the tools of national power to shape the world in the direction we would like to see it go.

This requires an engaged and proactive foreign policy, and a willingness to accept some risk.

I raise the subject of risk because I am keenly aware of what is happening on Capitol Hill next week, when Secretary Clinton will appear publicly before the Select Committee on Benghazi.

Much has been said about the Benghazi Committee, but I have a unique perspective on these issues going back to my time in government.

I enjoyed every day I served as secretary of state, with one exception – August 7, 1998.

That was the day our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed. More than 220 people died, including 12 Americans and 40 Foreign Service nationals. Almost 5,000 people were injured.

Nothing in my life can compare to the emotion I felt when I accompanied the bodies of ten of my fallen colleagues across the Atlantic to a ceremony at Andrews Air Force base.

I had often talked about how government officials should be accountable, which is easy enough to do when you are pointing the finger at someone else, but I had never felt the full burdens of high office until that day.

While I knew that I could not guarantee the safety of our people, I had a responsibility to do everything within my power to try. So in the aftermath of the bombings, we established an accountability review board chaired by retired Admiral William Crowe.

In the course of the investigation, Admiral Crowe identified a number of shortcomings in our approach to diplomatic security. A letter also surfaced that our Ambassador to Kenya, Prudence Bushnell, had written expressing concern about limited resources for embassy protection.

I faced many critics at the time, particularly in Congress, but we were ultimately able to work together to increase funding for diplomatic security and implement the recommendations of Admiral Crowe.

My experience in 1998 parallels Secretary Clinton's in the aftermath of the Benghazi attacks. We both took responsibility, appointed accountability review boards, and worked with appropriate congressional oversight committees to try to fix what went wrong.

But with all those similarities, there was one key difference. Three years after the Benghazi attacks, Republicans in Congress chose to launch an investigation – and, as they now admit, its purpose is to inflict political damage on Hillary Clinton and the Obama administration.

It is very telling to me that the focus of the investigation, which has cost taxpayers \$4.5 million, now seems to have shifted to her e-mails.

Our country can and should have a debate about how to balance our need to project influence abroad with our responsibility to protect our diplomats and security professionals, acknowledging that the courageous people who take these jobs know there are risks.

What we should never have done is to politicize the deaths of four Americans. This investigation is an insult to their memories, and the committee should be disbanded.

It takes a special kind of cynicism to exploit a terrorist attack for partisan political gain, but unfortunately such views seem to be taking hold this election cycle.

We have seen this administration's opponents do everything possible to derail sensitive international negotiations, while proclaiming that our president is weak because he lacks the phony bluster of Putin.

But most worrying of all is the constant drumbeat of naysayers who argue that our country is somehow headed down the tubes.

I, for one, reject their doomsday scenarios.

The truth is we don't need to make America great again. We are great now, and our best days are still ahead of us – if we have a leader who leverages our strengths as a diverse, hard-working, and innovative country of immigrants and strivers.

That is what Democrats must be about next year – appealing not to our country’s fringe tendencies, but to the values that have made America great and our engagement around the world so essential.

This can be done because it is what we have always done.

Consider the Democrat who was president when my family found refuge in this country, Harry Truman.

He never hesitated to defend America.

But neither did he ever fail to associate the United States with the purposes of the UN Charter, the interests of our allies and the goal of helping others.

He had the strength to act decisively, but also the wisdom to lead in a way that attracted international support.

He worked tirelessly to strengthen global institutions and law, but reserved the option of independent action.

He saw America as exceptional not because it was exempt from the rules demanded of others, but because it was determined to create a world in which rules had real meaning.

And he was resolute in defining America not in terms of its possessions, but rather its ideals.

“We believe that all men have a right to equal justice under law and equal opportunity to share in the common good,” he said.

“We believe that all men have a right to freedom of thought and expression.

We believe that all men are created equal because they are created in the image of God.”

Truman’s words, with a little updating as to gender, still speak to us today, a new day in an age-old struggle between hope and fear on earth.

It is a struggle we can and will win – if progressives stand up for what we believe in, and show the country we can lead with intelligence, conviction, and strength both here at home and abroad.

Thank you very much.

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