

Nations on the Brink

by Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

Center for Global Development - June 8, 2004

Thank you, Nancy, for your introduction.

And thanks to Ambassador Eizenstat, Congressman Porter, and all of the distinguished and accomplished members of the Commission that you assembled, including Dr. Jeremy Weinstein, the Project Director.

And welcome, Mr. Brown, and Dr. Hamre.

This Commission, and the Report that you bring us today, not only confirm the stature of the Center. They demonstrate why the work of the Center of will be indispensable in these extraordinary and difficult times.

Let me begin by saying: The weak states that are the subject of this Report are cracks in the very foundation of our international system.

Left untended, they can and they will, in my view, threaten the entire edifice of political and economic stability.

I know that every one in this room already recognizes that fact...

...and this Report will make that clear to a wider audience.

It makes clear the new kinds of security threats that weak and failed states present. That alone is a point that must be driven home. Those new threats have radically changed the world in which we live.

Just as importantly, this Report provides a blueprint to fashion an effective response to those threats.

It makes clear, specific recommendations to refocus our attention, reallocate our resources, and reform our institutions.

The threats to our security from weak and failed states are very different from the threats we are used to, and very different from the threats we are prepared for.

It is not new that there are poor countries on our planet.

Nor is it new that those same countries often suffer under corrupt, incompetent, and misguided governments.

What is new in today's world is the effect on our lives, the threat to our own security, that can come from those age-old sources of human misery.

Now the very symbols of the technological superiority of our age, from the cell phone to the internet to jet airliners, have been transformed into weapons in the hands of those who are the declared enemies of our way of life.

They allow stateless actors the to reach out from the shadows, from weak and failed states, to attack us here at home.

Those states can destabilize their neighbors and whole regions, creating humanitarian crises as severe as any natural disaster.

With the proliferation of chemical, biological, and even nuclear weapons, weak and failed states represent more profound and frightening threats, whether those weapons are in the hands of a rogue government, or in the hands of people beyond the control of any government.

Failed states are fertile ground for drug production and trafficking, feeding our own drug problems here.

With the scourge of AIDS and other diseases that know no borders, we cannot afford the existence of more states that cannot feed, house, educate, or inoculate their citizens.

For all of these reasons, we ignore failed states at our own peril. We have both a humanitarian obligation and a national security mandate to pay attention.

That clear message from the Report makes it required reading.

What can we do?

The Commission has challenged us with a clear list of specific proposals that will demand, as I said, that we refocus our attention, reallocate our resources, and reform our institutions.

You will hear a lot more about these recommendations when Ambassador Eizenstat, and Congressman Porter, along with Mr. Brown and Dr. Hamre, discuss them in a few minutes.

But I want to highlight a few of them.

First, the severity and urgency of the threats from weak and failed states demand that we take seriously - for our own sake - the task of economic development.

For my own part, I was encouraged to see broader and deeper debt relief among the very specific first steps that need to be taken to get the poorest of the poor countries on their feet.

Reforms, now in law, of the HIPC ["HIP-ICK"] program that I introduced with Senator Santorum seek to find a more flexible, sustainable, and effective approach to debt relief.

I have personally asked Treasury Secretary Snow to put that new formula on the table at the G-8 Summit we are hosting this week.

As we seek ways to reduce the debt burden that Iraq has inherited from Saddam's regime, we should remember that same approach can help other countries now on the brink.

The President's new Millennium Challenge Account offers an important new approach to economic development assistance - rewarding those countries that have shown progress in the basic reforms that can create sustainable growth.

But there is a risk that the Millennium Challenge Corporation will do the cooking, and it will fall to others to do the dishes. We must make sure that any country whose instability can threaten us receives the attention it needs.

Next, more attention and resources directed toward stabilizing countries on the brink must be backed up by better organization of our own institutions.

We need to be smarter, and to do that we need to have better coordinated and more flexible institutions.

In December of last year, Chairman Lugar and I began discussions with experts from in and outside government on whether the United States is adequately organized and equipped, and its personnel trained, to deal with post-conflict reconstruction.

We must make sure that we are faster on our feet and that we don't let artificial lines on a bureaucratic chart deny us the people and resources we need.

To that end, Chairman Lugar and I have introduced "The Stabilization and Reconstruction Civilian Management Act", legislation which, among other things, would create a Rapid Response Corps that is able to respond to both emerging threats and emerging opportunities. I was gratified to see that our proposal fits with the thinking of the Commission.

I am also encouraged that the Administration appears to be moving in the direction of creating better mechanisms to coordinate civilian activities within the State Department.

This is a first step toward addressing serious voids in the ability of our agencies to effectively respond to complex stabilization emergencies.

We also need to do more to give individuals the ability to use their skills, abilities and initiative to contribute to post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

To that end, I have introduced legislation to create a Return of Talent Visa Program which would allow legal immigrants in the United States to return to their countries of origin to help with reconstruction, without their time out of the United States affecting their ability to meet their requirements for obtaining U.S. Citizenship.

I am pleased that this proposal is supported by the Commission.

And finally, we are not in this alone. Virtually all of the civilized world faces the same threats from the terrorism, violence, disease, and instability that can breed in weak and failed states.

Without allies, without friends, without added resources, our efforts cannot succeed.

As the Commissioners put it in their report, we must leverage our own resources with those of other nations. The same logic that compels us to act applies to them.

Together, we can do more to meet this new common threat.

Over the years, the Breton Woods institutions, the United Nations, and other multilateral entities have been created to meet evolving challenges. The new threats we face demand that we reform them to meet the very different tasks of stabilizing and supporting weak and failed states.

My brief remarks cannot do justice to the work that the Commissioners have put into this report.

You will have a chance this morning to hear from the Chairmen much more of their analysis and their prescriptions.

I want to close with a warning, based on my years of experience here in Washington.

I don't have to tell anyone here, you who have been working on international economic development, that there are strong, built-in biases in our system against the project outlined in this report.

If this were easy, we would already have moved against the threats posed by poverty, instability, and disease in the poorest countries of the world.

The consensus needed to move our Constitutional system is hard to come by, and is often only found in the face of immediate threats.

Even for the richest nation in the world, additional resources - directed, need I add, to countries, who if they are known at all, are known for their failings - will be hard to come by, especially given the reckless budget policy that has saddled us with record deficits.

The institutional reform we need will run up against bureaucratic inertia and entrenched stakeholders.

And we have a lot of work to do to restore the trust and to secure the cooperation of other nations that we must have if we are to meet these new threats.

Nevertheless, with this report, I think we can say we have already taken the first steps - we have a clear view of the challenges before us, and we have concrete proposals for engaging them.

So, Nancy, the Center deserves all our thanks for putting together this Commission.

And to the co-chairs, Ambassador Eizenstat and Congressman Porter, congratulations on your achievement. With your report, the problem of countries on the brink is now clearly before us.

If there is to be a solution to this problem, it begins here.