Conflict resolution in divided societies

Senator George Mitchell

Senator George Mitchell is one of the era's most distinguished international statesmen, and currently chairs the Sharm el-Sheikh Fact Finding Committee. He served as chairman of the International Commission on Disarmament in Northern Ireland and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the U.S. government's highest civilian honor. From 1980-1995 he was a U.S. Senator and was Senate Majority Leader for six years. After leaving the Senate, he joined the Washington, DC law firm of Verner, Liipfert, Bernhard, McPherson and Hand. He is the author of four books, the most recent of which is "Making Peace." He received his undergraduate degree from Bowdoin College in 1954, served as a US Army Counter-Intelligence Corps officer until 1956, and received his LLB degree from Georgetown University in 1960.

George Mitchell's vast experience in resolving conflicts in the hot spots of the world has led him to conclude that negotiating with Osama bin Laden is not an option and any attempt to do so would be futile.

"Human history has been plagued over and over again with individuals and causes which don't lend themselves to rational resolution. And I think that's the case with these particular terror networks now," said Mitchell, speaking before the Global Executive Forum.

The terrorists' fanaticism and hatred preclude rational discussion, making their demands impossible to satisfy. "If we were to give them everything they want, they'd come up with one more thing. And if we gave them one more thing, they'd think of something else they want."

Osama bin Laden rants about U.S. support of Israel, "but this is propaganda and not what has formed his attitudes about the United States," said Mitchell.

"If tomorrow the Israelis and the Palestinians met and agreed to embrace and implement the Mitchell Report, does anyone here believe that bin Laden would then stop his activities? It's a part of his propaganda campaign, but it is not the central motivating force behind his movement."

What does bin Laden want? The former U.S. Senator enumerates: "He wants us first to withdraw all support from Israel, then to help him overthrow the Saudi government, help him overthrow the Egyptian government, and withdraw all American forces and influence from the Middle East."

And if we do all that? "I guarantee at that point he'll dream up another demand."

Future attacks

While Mitchell espouses peaceful and democratic dialogue as the route to solving political conflicts, "that does not mean that it is the only possible route, or that the use of military force is never justified."

He supports the administration's military action "as it's been conducted so far," a conclusion he arrives at through "a process of basic common sense and rational self-defense." With or without military action, "there can be no guarantee that there will not be further attacks against the United States. Therefore, the emphasis has to be on limiting the number and effectiveness of further attacks." To do this, intelligence gathering, both technical and human, is a high priority, and the U.S. must correct its deficiency in human intelligence. Through a multinational effort, terrorist networks in 60 countries are being tracked, with Britain's long-established human intelligence operation vital to these efforts.
Britain’s foreign intelligence service was born several centuries ago when the country had a far-flung empire and was the dominant military and economic power in the world, Mitchell explained. "Although their empire has dwindled -- it now exists only in Northern Ireland -- their intelligence service has not. As a consequence, they have a very effective, quite disproportionate intelligence system to their own needs. A lot of it is human intelligence, based on old ties, particularly in the region we're now involved in."

Accordingly, the U.S. is the beneficiary of "a very strong and close relationship with Britain, and I think it's of critical importance that we nurture their participation."

Mitchell suggests this is not as easy as it sounds, for while the President has done extremely well so far, the tough decisions lie ahead.

Tough decisions

President Bush is under intense political pressure, primarily from some members of his own party, to expand the military campaign into Iraq, Syria, and other countries suspected of exporting terrorism, said Mitchell. Neither the British nor our other allies hold this view. "When we have been successful in destroying the terrorist networks, toppling the Taliban and killing or capturing bin Laden, many of our allies will consider it a job well done and time to go home, while many in this country will be saying just the opposite."

Tough decisions will be necessary to maintain the coalition in the face of mounting political pressure to broaden the campaign.

A particularly difficult challenge exists in the Arab states, where one of bin Laden's objectives has been the overthrow of the governments of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. "Most of his estimated 5,000 fighters are Saudis and Egyptians who have been exiled from, or left, their countries because they consider them to be repressive regimes. And their hostility to the United States arises out of what they see as our support for those regimes. Let's face it, the governments of Saudi Arabia and Egypt are not American-style democracies."

The Muslim world is not monolithic, Mitchell pointed out. "The Muslim nations have different cultural, linguistic, political and economic heritages. Even their religious heritages, although they are all Muslim, are different." What they have in common are the absence of democracy; rapidly growing populations; stagnating economies, and widespread poverty. Also lacking is a government-approved process for political dissent and protest. Islam, which is a way of life, fills the vacuum. "Through the mosques, which provide safe meeting places, Islam lends itself to the germination of political dissent," said Mitchell.

The U.S. is in a difficult position because we prop up governments that are repressive and undemocratic. "These governments relieve the pressure on themselves by permitting some degree of Islamic fundamentals to flourish within their borders. So it's a very tough balancing act that we are engaged in, and which the leaders of these countries are engaged in. How well they manage the balancing act, particularly in Pakistan, will be an important factor in the success of this operation."

Admired, not hated

Contrary to what television news would have us believe, we are not hated by everyone in the world, Mitchell said. Recently, he was in South Korea meeting with the president, the prime minister and the legislative leadership. "They went to great lengths to tell me that the people in the government of South Korea strongly support the continued presence of the 37,000 American troops stationed there."
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In his travels across Europe, Mitchell has asked government leaders whether the United States should withdraw its military forces back to its national territory, as Russia has done since the breakup of the Soviet Union. The answer has been an emphatic No.

"Every single leader in Europe wants an American military presence in Europe because they see that as political insurance, not as military insurance."

There is a reason for these attitudes. "Never in history has a dominant military power possessed the high level of moral authority that the United States has accompanying its economic and military strength," said Mitchell. "Every other dominant power has had to fight to hold onto the allegiance of its neighbors and has done so through the threat of force. We have been able to do it by other means."

Mitchell has spent a lot of time in Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East, and he has found that "there is widespread admiration for the United States, despite the feelings that our policies are heavily biased in favor of Israel. And there is a certain resentment and anger at the feeling of being bypassed and by what Muslims see as American arrogance. But they admire American values."

Homeland security

The question was asked: Are we at risk of militarizing our society in view of the security steps now being taken or talked about; i.e., National Guard troops at airports and identity cards?

"I think we'll come out of this stronger, freer and wealthier although we will make some adjustments along the way, particularly with respect to access and departure from the country by non-citizens. Not that I favor closing off immigration, but I think we do need to tighten it up very, very much."

As for the non-citizens already in the country, the law should be enforced, Mitchell said, adding that he voted against the first amnesty provision that was proposed during the Reagan Administration. He predicted that such a provision would, in time, encourage a second amnesty provision, and instead suggested a change in laws that would have been more equitable. "It took about 15 years, but my prediction has come true. Now we've got a new amnesty program being proposed and I think it's just the wrong way to deal with the problem."

American influence

Mitchell is concerned that there is a widespread perception among young people that power - economic and military - is the exclusive basis for American influence in the world.

"I do not believe that to be true. I've spent most of the past seven years in Europe and have been most places in the world, and I believe that what attracts people to the United States, what inspires them, are our ideals, as set forth in the charter documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These are not easily summarized but certainly they include the primacy of individual liberty, the concept of equal justice under the law, and the notion of fair opportunity for every member of society.

"This is, I think, the first true meritocracy in human society and it is the thing that appeals most to people around the world; that in America, everybody has a chance to get ahead in a way that has not always been true in all other countries.

"Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to conduct this conflict in a way that is consistent with those fundamental values and to make certain that we make clear to our own people, and especially to our
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young people, that it is the ideals which make our society attractive to people around the world, not just our strength. I think the President has done that so far. I commend him for it, and particularly Secretary Powell, who is a close, personal friend of mine.

"The hard part is ahead. But if the same methodical approach and restraint and focus are brought to bear, I think we'll successfully navigate all of these difficult issues."

Slow process

"The making of peace is a long, slow, difficult process in which for every step forward, there is at least one and usually two steps backward," said Mitchell. "It requires, above all else, patience and perseverance, qualities for which our country has not been especially noted in the past, but which I think will be in much greater demand in this current conflict and in the pursuit of peace in these circumstances."

Economics, not religion primary cause of conflicts

The conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Middle East and the Balkans have religious roots, but "the conflicts are not exclusively or even primarily religious in nature," said George Mitchell.

"In the case of Northern Ireland and the Balkans, the conflicts are very much about national identity. The Protestants in Northern Ireland think of themselves as British. The Catholics think of themselves as Irish. Although the religion gets the press, that's the real division, and it's hugely economic as well."

Mitchell described his first day in Northern Ireland, when he was taken to see the Peace Line, a 30-foot high wall that physically divides the two communities in Belfast. He met with a group of Catholics on their side of the wall, and with a group of Protestants on their side of the wall.

"I was struck by the tremendous persuasiveness and powerful oratory skill with which presentations were made. It was my first awakening to the fact that this a highly advanced and literate society.

"In the urban areas of Northern Ireland, there is a very high correlation between unemployment and violence. As many as one out of three of the adult males are born, live their lives and die without ever having held a job or having a chance to get a job; that's changing now with the coming of peace. And I was deeply struck by the absence of religion in their discussions of how to resolve this thing.

"Where you don't have hope or opportunity, where you don't have economic growth and job creation, you have the ingredients for instability. On the day the war broke out in Kosovo, the unemployment rate was 70 percent. When the Oslo Agreement was reached between Israel and Palestine, the unemployment rate among Palestinians was 20 percent. Seven years later, after what they thought was a process that would help them, unemployment hit 40 percent.

"What's been lacking in the Israel-Palestine discussions so far has been the economic component. A new version of the Marshall Plan is needed to make clear to the Palestinians that there is a peace dividend, because their economy now is in chaos."
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“The Israelis have suffered as well. A hugely disproportionate part of their gross domestic product goes into military expenditure and it creates a high state of anxiety among all of the people.”

Globalization benefits many

“Globalization has become a pejorative term in much of the world. But I happen to believe that it is first, inevitable; second, very much in our interest; third, very much in the interest of people around the world,” said Mitchell, who, as U.S. Senator, was a leader in opening markets to trade and led the Senate to ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement and creation of the World Trade Organization.

"While there are obviously excesses, as there are in the purest forms of capitalism, the benefits to the largest number of people are so many and so manifest that I think we should pursue it,” said Mitchell.

"However, I think we should pursue it in a way that can be much more benign, both in our own country and beyond. And we should obviously be devoting a much larger proportion of our gross domestic product to assistance of others, particularly in developing impoverished countries abroad.

"Most Americans think that we contribute about 15 percent of our budget to foreign aide. It's a tiny fraction of that, one of the lowest in the world. Some people point to needs right here in this country to support their beliefs that money should not be going abroad. That's an attitude that takes leadership and education to overcome.

"Fifty years ago, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in Asia. Now, they're the third wealthiest. Why? Because we're their largest trading partner. We opened up free market opportunities for them. We could do this in other places around the world, particularly in the so-called Muslim world, to their benefit and to ours.”