

**HUDSON  
INSTITUTE**

**THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S MIDDLE EAST  
POLICY:  
IS THE STRONG HORSE LOSING ITS LEAD?**

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KENNETH WEINSTEIN: Well, good afternoon and welcome. I'm Ken Weinstein, CEO of Hudson Institute. I'd like to welcome you, welcome our Book TV audience and various other camera crews that are here to the Walter and Betsy Stern Conference Center here at Hudson Institute for today's book forum for the new book by our visiting fellow, Lee Smith, entitled, "The Strong Horse: Power, Politics and the Clash of Arab Civilizations." The book has just been published by Doubleday.

I should say that "The Strong Horse" is an important new book and also a wonderful read, which I urge all of you to buy. For those of you in the audience here, it's available for purchase after the event for \$20. For those of you in the TV audience, it's available online and in fine bookstores everywhere.

Now, Lee, whom I've gotten to know well over the last few years, is almost a unique figure here in Washington. He brings a distinct perspective to the dialogue on Middle East affairs, independent of the inside-the-Beltway discussions, prognostications and personality politics. Lee is first and foremost a writer and a thinker, and his work has a distinctly literary touch; a real appreciation for the fundamental role of culture and history in politics in the deepest sense.

Now, Lee, who was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and was just back there, has just returned from his native Puerto Rico, but grew up in Brooklyn— the Smith, I guess, is the Irish side from his father's side of the family – graduated with degrees in English and Latin from George Washington University before going off to do graduate work in classics at Cornell University. His writing has appeared in such publications as Atheneum, Grant Street and The Echo Press.

And he was editor-in-chief of the Village Voice's "Voice Literary Supplement" as well. He has since gone on to appear in many of the leading publications in the policy world including – he is a frequent contributor to The Weekly Standard on Middle East affairs and writes also for numerous other publications. He has written for The Washington Post, The New York Times, Slate and just about every major publication online and in hard copy you can think of.

Now, as a native New Yorker – or I guess as a Puerto Rican turned New Yorker, I should say, correct myself – Lee decided after 9/11 to try to figure out why 9/11 occurred. And rather than doing what most of us here in Washington do, Lee decided to uproot himself and to move to the Middle East, where he spent time in, among other places, Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Tel Aviv, the Gulf. And his book offers an absolutely fascinating account of the people he came to know intimately; their differing views of the Arab world, of bin Laden, of Hezbollah, Hamas, Saddam Hussein, Arab liberals and of the U.S.

And the characters, the portraits that you come across in this book are fascinating: the Salafi professor at the American University in Cairo who wants one of the most enlightened universities in the Arab world; Raouf, the Egyptian free thinker and religious skeptic fascinated by Kant, Descartes and Voltaire; Lana, the doctor whose feminist aspirations are crushed by the

radicalism all around her; Fauz, the Lebanese Christian whose new role was Natan Sharansky and his call for democracy in the Middle East. Now, these portraits that Lee paints – and they're quite vivid – are set against the backdrops of the day, including the July 2006 Hezbollah war.

Now, Lee draws on his knowledge of Arabic and Muslim history, including what might be called Muslim pre-history, setting the Koran in the context of its poetic antecedents to make the case that, claims to the contrary notwithstanding made by a slew of intellectuals from Edward Said onward and by policymakers in both Democratic and Republican administrations, the problems in the Middle East, he argues, have little to do with Israel, the U.S. or the West in general. Instead, he argues, the real problem as he sees it within the politics of the Arab world is the notion, the legitimacy that force is given within those politics.

And Lee will do a far better job of representing his own argument in a minute. And after Lee speaks, we have the real honor of hearing from two very distinguished commentators, men who know the Washington policy world and the world of Arab politics quite well. We will first hear from Elliott Abrams, who served as senior director for democracy and human rights, senior director for the Near East and deputy national security advisor, handling Middle East affairs in the George W. Bush administration.

He also served in the Ronald Reagan administration as assistant secretary of state for international organizations, assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian organizations – where I actually interned for him – my first real boss in Washington – in the summer of 1984 – and Latin American affairs as well. And he has served – I'm proud to say – he's an alumni of numerous organizations, including our own. He was a senior fellow here at Hudson Institute in the 1990s before going on to become president of the Ethics and Public Policy organization. Elliott is currently senior fellow for Middle East studies at the Council on Foreign Relations here in Washington.

Now, our other distinguished speaker and commentator is Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman, who is the assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. A career diplomat, Ambassador Feltman served as U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Lebanon from July 2004 to January 2008, which is of particular interest, given the focus on it in this book. Prior to his assignment in Lebanon he headed the Coalition Provisional Authority's office in Irbil, in Iraq, serving simultaneously as deputy regional coordinator for the CPA's northern area.

From 2001 until 2003, Ambassador Feltman served as U.S. consulate general in Jerusalem, first as deputy principal officer, then as acting principal officer. And during his long, and as I mentioned, distinguished career in the Foreign Service, which began in 1986, he also served in Tel Aviv and Tunis. He studied Arabic at the University of Jordan in Amman after joining the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs in 1993.

I want to thank our distinguished commentators for being so willing to share their insights and also for being willing to take questions from the audience.

And so without further ado, let me pass the floor to Lee Smith.

LEE SMITH: Thanks very much, Ken, and thanks to all of you for coming today. Thanks to my friends whom I see in the audience; some of whom I thanked in the acknowledgements to the book, but I'll thank you again from the Lebanese contingent, like Filos Meksed, Hussein Abdul-Hussein, Jen al-Hur, to some of my American friends, like Andrew Tabler, Matt Piltrinthradich. I also want to thank my colleagues at Hudson – the board, scholars and staff; and especially today's moderator, Hudson CEO Ken Weinstein. Thanks for your support and advice, thanks for all your loyalty and your friendship and especially your great good humor.

I'm also greatly indebted to my two fellow panelists this afternoon, and not just for agreeing to participate in order to make this an interesting event. It is decidedly an honor and privilege to share this panel with Assistant Secretary Feltman and Mr. Abrams, not least because their efforts in the Middle East have played such a singular role in American policy over the last nine years and also in my thinking about the region.

As I wrote in the book, it was a great time to be an American in the region. It was a privilege to be represented by a U.S. government that had taken the side of freedom. I lived in Beirut during the heyday of what we've come to call the Cedar Revolution, where our many Lebanese regarded Mr. Abrams as President Bush's deputy national security advisor for global democracy strategy, and Assistant Secretary Feltman, when he was the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon – (inaudible). And many of them still do, as do I. Thus there are known in the book as tutelary spirits, a designation from which in due course wish to distance themselves, but there you have it.

And yet, it was by watching U.S. strategy in the Middle East unfold that provided much of the impetus for this book.

So "The Strong Horse" is partly about regional transformation as well as a transformation in my own thinking about the region. In particular, why did these very good policies not succeed as intended? Or why has democracy not caught on in the Middle East to date? The convenient explanation is that these policies were indeed the right ones; that is, supporting the democratic aspirations of Arabs and standing against both Islamist militants and the region's repressive regimes was correct. The problem of it was that the Bush administration failed in implementing them.

No doubt the previous White House made many errors; some of them deadly to Americans as well as Arabs. One specific piece of criticism is that the Americans should have provided more security, and earlier on than they did. My more general criticism is this, however: that we should have taken the Arabs' fears more seriously.

We Americans believed we were bringing democracy, while discounting as a far-fetched conspiracy theory the long-held conviction of many Arabs; that someday, the Americans would come to play "divide and conquer;" that someday the Arabs would set each other at each other's throats. As it turned out – in too many places across the region – that's exactly what happened.

Of course, it wasn't America's hand that blew up mosques in Iraq. Abu-Musab Al-Zarqawi wasn't on Washington's payroll when he slaughtered Shia, nor was Hassan Nasrallah acting on behalf of CENTCOM when Hezbollah killed Sunnis in West Beirut and Sunnis in the Chouf Mountains. It wasn't the Bush administration that conducted a campaign of terror in Beirut, assassinating Lebanese politicians, journalists and civil society activists; and the U.S. Department of State sent in small opposition figures, intellectuals, journalists and bloggers to prisons in Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East, where they were subject to torture, rape and murder. It was Arabs who did this to other Arabs.

It is precisely this vicious political culture, the Americans believed, that had nurtured a hothouse flower like Osama bin Laden. These regimes were so relentlessly cruel to their own peoples that the only option the Arab masses had for political expression was a vision of Islam as bloody-minded as the regimes themselves. And so the Americans would give the Arabs another choice: democracy, freedom, as speaking over the heads of Arab leaders and targeting the worst regimes, starting with Saddam Hussein.

As the al-Khayyat columnist, Hazim Sevia, put it, describing the chaos of post-invasion Iraq circa 2005-2006, the Arabs thought the problem was colonialism, Zionism, the Americans, et cetera. The Americans thought the problem was Saddam's regime. The problem, however, as it turned out was Arab society itself. On reflection and from a distance, the paradox is obvious. A political culture where the modernism is not the exception but the political norm does not easily lend itself to remedy, never mind transformation.

And that, in short, is the subject of my book: the issues – or some of the issues that have set the Arabs against themselves, a clash of Arab civilizations – clashes between sects and confessions, between Arab regimes and their own people, the regimes against their domestic rivals and insurgencies – clashes between Arab regimes themselves, between and within families, and even inside the Arab individual.

Perhaps most importantly, there is the clash between worldviews, where on one hand there is the democratic and progressive trend embodied in the venerable extant tradition of Arab liberalism; and on the other, the bloody and violent current – the bloody and violent current represented by far too many of the region's seminal figures, from Saddam and bin Laden, Nasrallah and Zarqawi, Bashar al-Assad and Khaled Mashal among others.

However, while I do believe there is a real clash between worldviews – Arab worldviews for the future and destiny of the region, unlike many I do not believe there is anything like a civil war in the Arabic-speaking Middle East, where the forces of liberalism are pitted against the armies of resistance. Wars have raged between men with guns and the outcome depends on how many, which way and at whom those guns were pointed. And here, the liberals, the moderates, as a minority of unarmed prophets, are at a distinct disadvantage.

I had the need to downplay the role of ideas, or the significance of the men and women who advocate those ideas. For the protagonists of my book, my heroes, are all men and women who have taken courageous stands; positions that would seem unimaginably reckless to most of us, against the region's political and cultural mainstream.

A young Egyptian intellectual who Ken referred to, whose fundamentalism is German idealism and whose life ambition is to translate all of Kant into Arabic; a Cairo doctor who wants all the freedoms that America has to offer, but as she says, in her country, in her city, in her language; a Syrian father of three who I watched in President Bush's second inaugural thanked God for the leader of the free world who was, in his words, the only man who cared about the Arabs.

And then there's my friend Fuaz. A former Lebanese basketball star, who, when talking about Hassan Nasrallah, explained, he mocks those who love life, but the party of life will fight to keep it. And we will fight for it, but they won't then, not right now, anyway. For at the moment, at least, the region is in the hands of those with guns; those who prize death.

That said, I should say about the title. The phrase, as you'll recall, is Osama bin Laden's: "When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature they will like the strong horse." I anticipate that this will be confused with the notion that Arabs understand only force, an idea unfortunately and incorrectly attributed to the Bush administration. The fact is that throughout history most of mankind has understood force. Those lucky few who are fortunate enough to be able to live their political lives free of the fear of violence are largely concentrated in the capitals of contemporary Western Europe and along the East and West coasts of the United States.

The inhabitants of the Arabic-speaking Middle East are not so fortunate. To say that Lebanon is held at gunpoint by an armed gang or that Syrian intellectuals and Egyptian rights activists are typically thrown in prison and tortured; that regional minorities like the Shia, Druze, Alawi, Christians, Kurds and Jews have often been the target of purges and political violence, all in the name of Arab nationalism, a corporatist ideology that seeks to erase communal as well as individual difference, is not to say that Arabs only understand force; but that violence is a central factor in Arab political life; that's it's impossible to understand the region without taking this into account.

One more thing about the book's title. The strong horse not only punishes his enemies. He also rewards and protects his friends, sometimes by punishing their enemies. This seems to me an entirely unobjectionable notion, for it is a precept derived from the most basic principle of human relations: to protect those whom you love from harm and to be prepared to do harm to those who would injure them.

But, sadly, these principles are too often neglected by our policy establishment across the political spectrum; a culture that among others has counseled rapprochement, engagement and even comity for those that have made their enmity towards us and our friends and allies clear; prospective relationships that would invariably commit the expense of our friends and perhaps potential friends, that many of the men and women today venturing their physical safety – their lives – on the streets of Tehran.

Policies that go against the natural course of affairs. Warming to enemies and freezing out allies are destined to fail. Socrates reminds us that a dog knows well enough to distinguish

friends from enemies. So should our policy establishment, including not only policymakers, but also analysts, researchers and journalists.

Moreover, such notions go against the American brain. The U.S. is a strong horse. In fact, it is the strong horse; not merely on account of our military might or even our technological prowess or the productiveness of our economy. Indeed, it is one of the great misconceptions held not only in the region, but by many here in the U.S. that it is possible to distinguish between the values that a culture holds dear and the goods that such a society produces. And so there are those who believe that technology will help the Arabs catch up to political modernity. Connection with the Internet, satellite TV, Bluetooth, et cetera, make the modern world so attractive that young Arabs will do anything for a ticket in the globalization sweepstakes.

But all this is to mistake the glossy surface of our society for the thing itself: the ideas and values that give rise to our technological ingenuity, economy dynamism and the goods that we toss off; whether it is information technology, military hardware or pop culture. Thus, we sell short not only Arabs for failing to catch up, but also ourselves. We sell short our core ideas and values: reason, empiricism, the belief in the inherent dignity of the human individual – and forget the amount of bloodshed over centuries on behalf of these ideas that has allowed us to live our political lives – political lives by which I mean man at his most fully human, living among other men free of violence. Our strength can have no other source than these ideas, these values.

Now I'll turn the floor over to my co-panelists, two men who to my mind represent these values – American values – in our foreign policy as well as anyone. (Applause.)

MR. WEINSTEIN: Elliott?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Thank you. First, I want to echo what Ken Weinstein has said. I have recently finished reading Lee's book. It is a really, really interesting book and I want to urge you to buy it. That's the important thing. Ken did not say, read it. He said, buy it. Whether you read it is up to you. (Laughter.) Buy it.

MR. SMITH: And give it to your friends, relatives.

MR. ABRAMS: Right. It's a pleasure to be here with Ken and with Lee and with Jeff Feltman, who I think was – I came to mostly as ambassador in Lebanon where I think he provided a model of what good an American ambassador can do if he understands how to use the resources and reputation of the United States and Department of State fully. That isn't the last nice thing I'm going to say. (Laughter, cross talk.) But I do want – I want to divide my remarks, which will be brief, into four categories, and it won't cover the whole spectrum. But human rights, Iran, Syria/Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and talk about this past year.

I was going to say and leave it at that, that I think that the U.S. record in the last year and the Obama administration record has been disappointing on human rights. There hasn't been enough said about human rights, and what has been said has not been said with enough oomph. You talk to Egyptian democracy activists and they have the sense that the American administration is not doing much for them. And if one looks at things like the budget for the

promotion of human rights and democracy in Egypt, it has in some ways, important ways, been cut in the last year.

I'm not aware – although, being on the outside I shouldn't necessarily be aware yet – of what the administration is planning for the next Egyptian elections; which, given that we are at or near the end of the Mubarak period, will be very important elections. And what we will do to try to make them as free as possible is quite important. But I should add here – I throw this back to Lee, and I hope that we get a chance to talk about it a little bit. Because he said in the book and he said just now, this was a great period to be in the Middle East; this was a great moment to be in the Middle East, when the American government was seen to be promoting freedom and democracy.

But later in the book, you seem to be saying this was a mistake; that the problem was misanalyzed in Washington, that the problem was quite deep in Arab society. You said just now, vicious political culture; the problem is Arab society itself. I want to ask you to combine all of that. If the policy was wrong, then why was it so great to be in – to be there when the policy is being promoted?

On Iran, obviously I'm going to have trouble covering this subject in two minutes. But I would say I think the administration had an Iran policy coming in, and that Iran policy would probably have been carried out had the election gone differently in June. But for complicated reasons of its own, the regime in Iran stole the election and gave rise to a potent opposition movement whose activities impress us really every week now as we watch them and as we watch they take.

My criticism would be – and I'm really not sure quite what American policy is now – policy seems to be, okay, we won't engage. Engagement, the original idea, has been put aside due to the events of June and since. But there's no new policy that's really been elaborated. Trying to get sanctions in the Security Council is a tool – a very important tool, but it isn't a policy. And it also doesn't look as if it's going to work because of the Chinese. So what is the policy? Here I would go back to Lee's concept of the strong horse and I just make one criticism.

I have been very unhappy at the comments by American military leaders – Secretary Gates and Adm. Mullen – and by the way, this is not a criticism of the Obama administration. This is a criticism of the American military, because this happened in 2008 as well. I have been very critical of their saying what a catastrophe it would be if military force were used against Iran. I don't understand that as a negotiating tactic. Even if they believe it, I don't understand why they would say it, and thereby reduce the pressure for negotiated settlement that would – the people running Iran would logically feel.

Now, more recently, Gen. Petraeus – most recently, Gen. Petraeus made a kind of countervailing statement in which he – CENTCOM commander – in which he said, we have plans for everything and we can carry out those plans, too, when it comes to Iran. That I think is a much more sensible message to be sending publicly to the ayatollahs.

Third, Syria and Lebanon, a subject very close to Jeff's heart as it is to Lee's and to mine. The policy is not 100 percent clear to me; again, sitting on the outside. There is, I think, a great deal of continuity here. It isn't necessarily – that's not meant to be a heartwarming remark because I think Bush administration policy became too soft or was too soft on Syria, and I think Obama administration policy is as well.

To put it a different way, the Syrians have been pursuing for years now a policy of repression – vicious repression at home, interfering in Iraq – and we have within the last six months Gen. Odierno reminding us that that interference continues – passing jihadis through into Iraq; the alliance with Iran and the arming of Hezbollah; the keeping of the Palestinian terrorist group headquarters in Damascus.

After the killing of Rafic Hariri, the United States imposed certain additional sanctions on Syria and we removed our ambassador. But since then there's really been just about no price that Syria has paid for continuing these policies. The Israeli government is to blame for this in part because it was the negotiation commenced by Prime Minister Olmert that really opened the door for Syria, which had been quite isolated – isolated from not only the United States but Western Europe. But the Israelis opened that door, I think, mistakenly.

In the last year, not only have the Syrians not paid a price for their conduct, but we have begun a kind of policy of engagement. We've had four or five or six high-level visits including Sen. Mitchell more than once. And engagement is neither good nor bad. It depends on what it produces. In the case of Syria I would argue it has produced literally nothing – nothing positive, anyway.

The negative is not seen only in Syria but of course in Lebanon, where the March 14th group won the election but could not put a government together for something like six months; and now has a government but isn't able to govern the country because of the power of the March 8th forces relying on Syria and Iran. This is obviously a tragic thing for Lebanon, the reassertion of Syrian power. And here's another case where I think the United States has not – under two presidents – has not been forceful enough in dealing with the Syrians. If you go back a few years, when the United States was suffering significant casualties in Iraq, just about all those jihadis were going through Damascus International Airport. So again, this is not a criticism of current policy. It's a criticism of U.S. policy for the last few years and up to the present.

Finally, on the Israeli-Palestinian question. I've written a lot about this and I shouldn't go on at much length. I think the fundamental error being made today is the same error that was made toward the end of the Bush administration, which is the focus – one might even say the sole focus of U.S. policy – is negotiations – getting a negotiation going. But the aftermath of Annapolis I think demonstrated that if the conditions aren't right those negotiations won't succeed.

The administration is devoting itself now to getting the Palestinians and Israelis to the table. It may get them to the table. The United States has a great deal of clout. But then what? I think it almost inconceivable that they will actually, under current conditions, reach an

agreement, sign an agreement, for reasons who can get into. But I think they're pretty far apart. I do not buy the notion that they're just an inch apart. And I don't see the ability to compromise the differences right now.

I think there should have been, over the last 10 or 15 years but let's just go back to the period after the death of Arafat. I think there should have been for the last five years anyway much more concentration on building the institutions and the sinews of the Palestinian state in the West Bank. Since the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, you have to say just in the West Bank. But I think there is progress. There could, I think, be a great deal more progress given the leadership on both sides. I don't think the reliance in American diplomacy on negotiations as likely – let me rephrase that.

It is sometimes said we need to get them to the negotiating table, and if you just rely on building Palestinian institutions, that's a formula for getting to a Palestinian state 50 years from now. I would argue that repeated efforts of negotiations that fail actually will take a lot longer than steady progress on the ground.

With that, I guess I turn it back to Ken.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Great. Thank you, Elliott, for those characteristically insightful remarks and I'm sure Ambassador Feltman is grateful because he gets to keep his job after your criticisms. We'll hear from Ambassador Feltman.

JEFFREY FELTMAN: Thank you. And thank you, Hudson Institute, for hosting us here and inviting me to participate. It's rather intimidating for me to sitting between two great minds and two very prolific commentators, and I'll return the complements. Because certainly, when I was ambassador in Lebanon, it was extremely important to know that we had the support of the White House for what we were trying to do in working with the Lebanese, and Elliott Abrams that was always the case.

It was always extremely important to know that the message of hope – what was actually happening in Lebanon – was getting out accurately, which Lee Smith always did. So I very much appreciate being included here today, even if I find it somewhat intimidating between these two gentlemen.

Let me mention sort of U.S. priorities in the region under the current administration and comment on some of the individual issues. Yes, we are trying to pursue a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. We're supporting a secure and sovereign Iraq. We're trying to secure a resolution to all of our differences with Iran, its nuclear ambitions as well as its destabilizing role in the region – its destabilizing role in Lebanon and Iraq, with the Palestinians, et cetera.

We're trying to counter violent extremism, taking an approach that accounts for security and development dimensions. We're manifesting President Obama's commitment to building partnerships with the citizens of the region on behalf of more prosperous, participatory and pluralistic societies. And what this means is yes, working on democracy, human rights and economic development.

And finally, addressing the grave security and development challenges in Yemen – and this is not saying it happened after December 25th – is something that very early on in this administration we were asked to start doing policy reviews on Yemen. So I would list – those are not the only things we’re working on in the region, but I would list those as priorities in the region.

And of course, the approach to trying to achieve these priorities is – I would say is partnership. It’s working with allies, building new allies. It’s trying to reach out. You’ve heard – of course we’ve talked a lot about President Obama’s speech in Cairo, but not only in Cairo. President Obama has been determined to change the tone of the U.S. relationship with Muslims around the world and particularly in the Middle East.

Now, the issues that we’re all talking about up here are difficult and they’re not going to be changed overnight – with a few – they’re not going to be changed by a speech, by a few meetings or a few months’ passage of time. But we have opened up new potential for cooperation that did not exist before.

Now, let me talk about some of the individual issues that Lee and Elliott have mentioned.

Middle East peace. I said our goal was to achieve a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. That means peace agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, between Israel and Syria, and between Israel and Lebanon. But the two-state solution to the Israelis and the Palestinians we believe is key. And we’re working on this in three different areas right now. One is the negotiating track. Elliott has mentioned why he questions whether this should be our priority right now. It is one of our priorities. It’s not been easy. In part, we did not really have a full year. The Netanyahu government was not prepared to start talking to us. There had been elections in Israel. The Netanyahu government needed to come together. So it was in May when the Netanyahu government was ready to start talking to us about this.

And the Palestinians waited until August, after August, when after the Fatah party congress in Bethlehem. So it’s not been a full year that we’ve really been able to engage with both parties. But do remember that a year ago, the Israelis and Palestinians were just coming out of a war. And now, both sides have reaffirmed their commitment to a two-state solution, and let’s hope we – let’s hope we can move ahead to the negotiating track. But it’s only one of three that we’re looking at as interlinked, going together and mutually reinforcing.

Second area is security. The Palestinians need security. The Israelis need security. But the Palestinian security performance – should I say, a good Palestinian security performance is absolutely essential to being able to move ahead on the negotiating track toward a peace – toward a peace track. And the Palestinians need to feel secure as well. So I would put security as a second track. There’s been some success – there’s been frankly quite a bit of success on this track when you talk about – when you talk about security in the West Bank.

The third track is exactly what Elliott was talking about, which is the institutional development. You can call it ground-up or whatever, supporting Salam – supporting Prime

Minister Salam Fayyad's plan to build Palestinian institutions that are worthy of their name, that can take – that can mean that the Palestinian state, when it comes into being, is a functioning, accountable state in which the citizens feel their needs are being met and in which they are participating.

These three things we believe have to go together. If you neglect the security track, it's obvious why it doesn't work. If you neglect the institutional track, it means that you're creating the conditions for what could very well be a failed state, even if you succeed on negotiations. But if you leave negotiations out, if you don't have a process, then there's very little incentive or interest for the Palestinians to be working on those other two tracks, the ground-up approach. So we see these three working together. And waiting to try to get back into negotiations we don't think serves anyone except the extremists.

On Iraq. Our strategic goal is an Iraq that is sovereign, stable and self-reliant. Now, you've read a lot about the transition because we are going through a transition – a transition from a military-led focus to a civilian-led focus. And believe me, those of us in the State Department know how closely this transition is going to be watched and how important the responsibilities are on our shoulders of getting this transition right. There's been a lot of blood and treasure that this country has committed to Iraq over the years, and we in the State Department and the civilian agencies must be up to the challenge of managing that transition to a civilian-led relationship.

There's a lot of debate in the papers now about the upcoming Iraq elections on March 7th. I would say that what this debate – are these Sunnis disqualified? Was that commission – did it have legitimacy to try to disqualify these Sunni candidates? All of this debate shows that elections matter in Iraq. I think it's basically a positive sign of how important the democratic process has been in Iraq that you see a debate that's this strong in Iraq today.

On Iran. This is – I think we would probably all agree – probably the biggest challenge that we face in the region. And the question is how does the international community work together to show that if a country openly defies its international obligations, refuses to play by the rules, how do you show that country that there are consequences for its behavior? Now, the United States has in fact looked at engagement as one way to address the diplomatic challenge that Iran poses to us. And let me say, to engage does not mean to embrace. To engage means using a different tool in your diplomatic toolbox, along with the others that you may be doing to try to fix the problem.

But I would argue that there's been a benefit of the president's commitment to engage. The president's demonstrated – the evidence that the president has used in trying to reach out to the Iranians, which is that we are not seen as blocking a diplomatic resolution to the problems of Iran. The focus is much more internationally on Iran and Iran's behavior now, and much less on, well, was there a chance for a peaceful resolution and the United States somehow just didn't open that door – didn't even knock on that door?

Without doubt, Iran's response to the P-5 plus-1 or E-3 plus-3 diplomacy has not been encouraging. The meetings in Geneva on October 1st look to be a promising start. But that in

fact – the Iranians in fact have not pursued that. It looks as though the Iranians are pursuing belligerence, not cooperation at this point.

But I think one thing to emphasize is that simply because the Iranians have not responded to a U.S. offer for greater engagement doesn't mean that we've simply stopped and waited. We simply said, okay, we're going to wait and see – and tell the Iranians they have a few months to respond; we'll wait a little bit longer; they haven't engaged us. That's not what's happening at all. At all times, all options are being examined. Consultations are happening with partners. But there's a much greater emphasis on the multilateral aspects now, vis-à-vis what we do about showing Iran there are consequences for simply ignoring the rules of the game that they're played (sic).

Talk a minute about the Levant, Egypt, that area. You know, Elliott's right. The Lebanon portfolio is certainly close to my heart. I feel blessed that I was able to spend the time that I did in Lebanon. President Obama, when he came into office, did in fact offer to engage Syria as well. I have traveled to Damascus a couple times, something I never felt I would do, certainly in 2006. Sen. Mitchell has traveled a couple times. We've had one – we've had a Syrian visit here in Washington.

I'll just say, these are tough discussions that we're having – that we're having with the Syrians. What's different is we're now talking not just about the Syrians; we're talking to the Syrians. But believe me, we're talking to the Syrians about all the issues that we've always talked about the Syrians on. So these new lines of communication do not mean, by any means, that we are somehow putting aside our concerns about Syrian policy or that we're somehow looking to suddenly sell out our Lebanese partners.

The message about not selling out Lebanon or our Iraqi partners has been made clear to the Syrians, both publicly and privately. But I – you know, I know Lebanon well enough to admit honestly that our friends in Lebanon continue to have questions about this and continue to ask – continue to ask us about this.

On Egypt. Our dialogue with Egypt covers the full range – covers the full range of issues. At every opportunity, this administration has engaged the Egyptian government on democracy, political reform and human rights issues. You may remember that when President Mubarak visited the White House in the summer, it was President Mubarak who told the media afterwards, yes in fact, President Obama had read – had raised the democracy and human rights issues with him.

There are definitely still areas of concern, and we watch very closely, for example, and raise with the Egyptian government, many levels, the case of the bloggers that were detained over the last few days that went to Nag Hammadi to try to pay condolences in what was a sectarian crime.

On democracy and human rights, and I'll close with this. The secretary has met with representatives of civil society, with democracy activists on basically all of her trips that she's taken in the region. I've been with her on these trips. And she has – and I've seen her stress

repeatedly at these events that it is the foreign policy of the United States and the Obama administration to promote, support and defend democratic participation and progress, including in Egypt.

It's not because we want all the other countries to be like us, but it's because we all want – we want all people to have the opportunity to decide for themselves how to live their lives. Elliott mentioned the Egyptian elections coming up this year for parliament and the shura council. And we believe it's in the best interest of Egypt to work toward a more transparent and democratic political system that protects human rights and freedoms under the rule of law.

And I would like to close, then, with a quote from President Obama from the Cairo speech that was delivered on June 4th. The president said, quote: “I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.” Thank you.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Ambassador Feltman. (Applause.)

We'll have Lee respond to remarks and then we'll turn it over.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Okay. Thanks.

Well, first of all, Elliott, to partly answer your question, revolutions are exciting things. And to be there on the ground and see all of these things happening, as I do explain in the book, I think that a lot of us got carried away, and that's certainly an easy thing – that's a thing that happens in the Middle East all the time. I mean, this is a place where lots of Americans travel to to articulate and express oftentimes some very extreme emotions that are entirely out of place in a country like the United States – the Middle East, whether they are fans of the resistance and they want to visit Hezbollah areas and collect Hezbollah key rings and T-shirts.

On the other hand, there are people – there are others – and I number myself as someone who was incredibly enthused about this. I think that's part of it. The other part of it – I don't think – I don't think those policies were wrong. I think they are extremely good policies. And I don't really believe it's the fault of the Bush administration for not implementing them correctly. I think though that there are certain deep issues that we didn't quite understand.

And I think the issues that we – the main issue we didn't quite understand is for the kind of revolution – because that is precise – I think that's precisely what the Bush administration was calling for – cultural, political and societal revolution – and the grounds weren't entirely prepared for that yet. And that takes a lot of groundwork. Again, I'm not blaming the Bush administration for not having done their proper groundwork, but maybe we all should have had a better idea that there's a lot of things that need to happen.

And just one more thing I'll say is that – a point that I do make in the book as well – in the different places that were perhaps more ready for this kind of transformation; for instance, Lebanon, where – I mean, Lebanon certainly has at least the kernel of a democratic quality, if not more. And we certainly said a lot of the right things; Assistant Secretary Feltman, when he was ambassador. And you, Elliott. I mean, the way you stood up for Lebanon was exemplary.

However, I think that without protecting that Lebanese democracy, that small kernel from the campaign of terror waged by both the Syrian regime and the Iranian regime – in other words, if we weren't ready to use strong horse tactics of our own, it was going to be a very vulnerable and very fragile experiment. And we say Secretary Rice at the time pointing every time the Syrians did something, saying, we know you're involved; we know something's going on. Which is fine to say that we know you're involved. But to say, we know you're involved, and to not do anything about it – to not exact a price for that violence against our allies and friends, I think that was a serious problem.

So I don't know if that's an entirely adequate answer. I think you're probably right. You've found one of the – I wouldn't say contradictions in the book, but one of the dilemmas that I'm still trying to think through.

MR. WEINSTEIN: (Inaudible.) Why don't we turn to the audience for questions? Let's begin with Hillel Fradkin, who's director of Hudson's Center on Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World in the back.

HILLEL FRADKIN: I won't have to introduce myself. Thanks, Ken.

I want to offer a comment which is essentially praise of the book. And I will amend Elliott's suggestion. I think, yes, go ahead and buy it, but also read it. (Laughter.)

But some of the people who have to read it, or should read it, are people in the region as well as people in the United States. And I just – there's been – the latter part – this panel is a large discussion of specific policies. But I want to commend it for some other things which are more prevalent in the book, which is an account of various views that have been taken of the region, which Lee I think successfully demolishes in a number of instances.

Perhaps the most important is the notion somehow that the problems of the region are our fault or someone else's fault, rather than the region itself and the culture that has prevailed. And I think that's really very, very important because the opposite view is frequently taken, and that does lead, I think, to partially a very false view of the region but also perhaps a false view of policy. Because the notion is if we're responsible for the problems, then our actions can fix them, and that relieves the region itself of the responsibility for facing its own dilemmas. And that's why I suggest that it would be rather important for people in the region to read it as well.

I do want to, though, ask a version of the question that Elliott raised, which is this: you paint, actually, a rather bleak picture of the capacity of the region to deal with its own problems, especially by means – the means we've been trying to pursue. And I wonder, in your last remarks you suggested there was a way to begin more modestly; that is, to say with a focus on

Lebanon, but that that required a very, very serious attempt to be rough – to put it bluntly – with Syria and Iran. But I guess my question is, is that what you're seriously proposing at this point? That the way to proceed is with – is through more modest efforts on the one hand, and with rougher tactics on the other?

The other thing I want to observe is not about the book itself but the discussion that's taken place. And it seems to me that it been brought out but should be emphasized. A number of the policies of the present administration are continuations of the policies of the previous administration. But they are nonetheless failures. That is, we've had a policy – for example, with Iran we've had a policy of engagement, one could say, since the summer of 2003, but emphatically since the spring of 2006, when it became the policy to offer negotiations to Iran subject to the suspension of uranium enrichment.

So we're long along – we're far along on this path. And it seems to me we've had ample evidence of – through both administrations that that path is not going to work. And the same thing is true, I think, with Syria. We have tried to be more engaging and the results have not been very successful.

So thank you very much. And again, I urge everyone to buy and read Lee's book.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Thank you, Hillel. Lee, why don't you respond?

MR. SMITH: I'll respond to the first part, then if you would like to respond to the second part.

I don't think that the policies are so modest; definitely rougher tactics. I mean, for instance, if you look at – if you look at Iraq right now, it's very hard to break down different countries in the region and work on – like, even if you were able to look at Lebanon or look at Iraq – I'll stick to those two countries in particular – and work on the different issues in those two countries, you have a lot of regional actors who have a vested interest in what's going on. Right now in Iraq it seems that the Saudis and the Syrians have made some sort of deal – along with the Iranians – over Prime Minister Malaki.

So with everyone interfering in everyone else's house, how do you sort of close down this one society and say, now we're going to look at Lebanon? What you need to do is you need to play fairly rough with different neighbors, like the Syrians, like the Iranians, perhaps with the Saudis. And the Saudis have generally been a fairly positive influence in Lebanon – up until recently, at any rate.

So I think these things are very, very difficult. So again, I don't think they're modest. I think it's extremely ambitious. And that, I guess, would be – that would be one of my issues. If we understand exactly how ambitious these ideas are – again, you can't just work on one of these societies on its own because there are different people who are going to have a hand in it.

Do you want to –

MR. ABRAMS: I would just say, I think with respect to Syria there is continuity in the failure to impose the kinds of pressures that might change Syrian policy, but not with respect to engagement. The last administration did not engage with Syria and we objected to Israel's engagement with Syria. So that one I reject.

MR. FELTMAN: When I look back on that 2005 period in Lebanon, I analyzed that one of the assets that the Lebanese had was international and regional unity. It obviously did not include Syria and Iran. But by and large, there was – the reaction to the assassination of Rafic Hariri brought together the Lebanese, but also brought together the international community; so that you had the Lebanese and the international community all working in the same direction for a short period.

Now, the Bush administration, working with the French, had already put in place the foundation stones for an international consensus regarding the need for Syria to withdraw from Lebanon before Rafic Hariri's assassination. It started in the summer and the fall of 2004. But that traumatic event, the assassination of Rafic Hariri, brought other countries into play, brought an international consensus into play. Unfortunately, that international consensus did not last. As Elliott said, the Israelis opened the door to re-engagement with Syria when they had their negotiations – their indirect negotiations via the Turks.

When President Sarkozy looked at policy for the Middle East, he made a dramatic shift from his predecessor. He decided that it was worth trying to engage Syria to try to see if you could embrace Syria in a way that would moderate Syrian behavior. Of course, more recently you've had the Saudi rapprochement which I think has a number of roots, but I would agree with you that part of the discussions have been on – have probably been on Iraq.

So you ended up at a point when we isolate – we were the ones isolated. It was no longer Syria being isolated. It was the United States that was being isolated. So I think this administration decided that engagement is not – engagement is something we need to try. And I'll emphasize. Engagement does not mean – as I said before, to engage does not mean to embrace. Engagement does not mean endorsement of certain policies. Engagement does not mean that you go and say, oh, President Assad, we love everything you're doing. It's simply a different tool to try to achieve the means – so far the results have been modest at best. But this also hasn't been something that we've been doing that long.

MR. ABRAMS: If I could just say something. I mean, I entirely agree with you that engaging someone is not the same as embracing them. However, I guess I would also ask why aren't we acting – and maybe we are, and please correct me – why aren't we acting with a conviction that diplomacy is not necessarily the opposite of war, when certainly it seems that – we seem to believe this president came to office campaigning on the idea that we're going to use real diplomacy, not just military action.

Why can't all of these tools be part of the same portfolio? So while we're working on engaging the Syrians – the Syrians certainly do this. They have – they're very talented at doing this. They're willing to sit down with anyone while they're blowing them up at different points.

So why aren't we using – why can't we use pressure on them as well as engage them diplomatically?

MR. FELTMAN: I would argue – I would argue that we are. I would argue that the – for example, there's been renewal of executive orders, that – we're trying to use, as I said, as much – we're trying to use as many tools in the diplomatic toolbox as we possibly can.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Okay. Whole bunch of hands have shot up. Let me ask, is there a follow-up on this specific issue? Let me turn to you. Please identify yourself and then we'll come back around to the microphone.

Q: Thank you so much. This is Turin Tardodo with Habertric. It's a Turkish daily newspaper. I'd like to follow up on the Syrian issue. Both Iran and Syrian are neighbors to Turkey in which Prime Minister Erdogan's government want to accomplish zero problems with both of them and all of Turkey's neighbors. With that, just try to understand the previous administration and also the current administration's approach to the Syrian angle.

I know that the Turkish officials, including the Turkish president, Abdullah Gul, and also the Turkish prime minister, Tayyip Erdogan, has expressed to us that their engagement with Syria has been widely appreciated by the Bush administration. Maybe they didn't start as so because they were against to it. But as the negotiations with Israel went forward, they actually thanked Turkey that they started this engagement with Syria. That's one. And so I'd like to ask you how it was during the Bush administration.

And on the current administration, you emphasized strongly that engagement does not mean embracement. How do you see the Turkish position now on Syria? Do you think that their engagement means the embracement of their government? Thank you.

MR. ABRAMS: The Bush administration did not favor, at the time it began, Syrian-Israeli negotiations because they let Syria out of the box we had carefully constructed for Syria. Syria was – in that period, if you go back to, for example, the number of European foreign minister visits over a 12-month period, very, very, very small. Syria was quite isolated. And the price it paid for the break in this isolation was zero.

Now that's mostly a criticism of the government of Israel; much less so a criticism of the government of Turkey in the sense that if two governments want to negotiate and they ask you to facilitate, I think your culpability is a great deal less than if you are the author of this engagement. There was no point – there was nothing to be gained by criticizing the Turkish role and I don't believe the United States ever did criticize the Turkish role. The problem, I would say, was trying to figure out what Israel or the cause of peace or the Syrian population or the Lebanese population or the Iraqi population gained from this. And I think the answer is nothing.

MR. FELTMAN: Yeah. I think this administration – any administration very much recognized the fact that Turkey is a significant player in the region. So Turkey's interests in the region obviously derive from Turkey's location; as you said, being neighbors to Syria, Iraq, Iran. We very much appreciate the partnership that has developed between the United States and

Turkey on a number of these issues. The Turkish relationship with Iraq, for example, we think is an extremely important element of Iraq's re-integration into the region.

I said that one of the Obama administration's policy goals – difficult as it is, time-consuming as it is – is a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. A comprehensive peace in the Middle East has to include a peace agreement between Israel and Syria. If the Israelis and the Syrians believe that Turkish mediation will help restart that negotiation, we're all for it.

Q: But do you think that they will at some point?

MR. FELTMAN: It looks very difficult at this point. We've talked a lot to both to the Israelis and the Syrians. Sen. Mitchell, as he told – as he said on his own television interview recently, has traveled to Ankara, has met with top Turkish officials, talks a lot with the Turkish foreign minister. It's not that easy right now to restart these negotiations, but we believe that they must be restarted at some point. And to the extent that the parties would wish to rely again on Turkey's good offices, again, we would be supportive.

MR. WEINSTEIN: May I remind everybody just to try to keep your comments brief, because we do have a significant number of questions.

Q: Thank you for organizing this conference. I think it's extremely important to bring these people together. Elliott, it's good to see you. I think you should be feeling good about what you and the administration shared and did in Iraq. Today, Iraq democracy is moving forward. Iraq has more political parties, free newspapers and free televisions than all of the Arab nations combined. So you should be – you should feel good and I feel good because my son was an officer in the army who served in Iraq. I'm surprised that Mr. Smith didn't mention anything about the Saudi government in his comments, the biggest opponent to democratic reforms in the world.

Mr. Feltman, the administration, Mr. Obama and Secretary Clinton and military officers are saying we should treat Arabs with respect, and I agree. We should treat people with respect. My question, sir, is – and I hope you can answer it as a citizen or as an officer. My question is how do you reconcile treating Arabs with respect, while we are supporting the most absolute dictatorships in Saudi Arabia and Egypt that treat people with utter disrespect?

MR. ABRAMS: Let me just say, a year ago, I might have had to answer that question. (Laughter.)

MR. FELTMAN: This is the time when you get off on the other floor of the elevator like the – National Chicken Association, or something (laughter).

It's not an easy – it's not an easy question, obviously, as you yourself know, because we believe that all of these governments should have the respect to their people. All of these – all of these governments that we're talking about should earn the respect of their people. People should feel that their governments are accountable. People should feel that they have a chance of participating in public life and they have a chance to speak in their lives that they can affect the

composition of their governments through elections. Sadly, many of these governments fall short of that ideal. You can say most of them fall short of that ideal.

When we talk about treating Arabs with respect, we're talking about the language we use to address the Arab world. We're talking about thinking about not just what we do but how we do it. When we're talking about using, for example, the tool that the Bush administration put into the bureau I now head, the Middle East Partnership Initiative – when we use the Middle East Partnership Initiative to promote civil society, how do we do it? Do we do it saying, Washington has the idea of how you should do it? Or do you actually go and talk to the civil society people? And we're increasing – so for example, giving grants to civil society organizations across the Arab world so that they themselves could help direct how best they do it.

It's trying to treat people at all levels in a spirit of partnership. It's not always – it's not always reciprocated, and you don't always say publicly what might feel good to be said publicly. You might feel, you know, I really need to beat up on this guy publicly. But it doesn't really – it doesn't really achieve that much. And so we're trying to speak respectfully and when appropriately behind closed doors about where we see the best way forward to building participatory democracy, to providing opportunities for civil society to emerge, things like that. These are not easy questions.

Q: Mohammed Shinew, Voice of America. Ambassador Feltman, what would the United States do to deal with the upcoming elections in Egypt, which everybody thought that it's three stages to pass the power from Mubarak – the father to his son? And for Mr. Smith, what kind of road you envision for the Obama administration to guide the Arab world out of its troubled past and at the same time keep the U.S. strong force in the area?

MR. FELTMAN: On the Egyptian – on the Egyptian elections you've got parliamentary and shura council elections this year, and of course, presidential elections the year after. We believe that it's in the interest of Egypt that the electoral process be opened up, that it be more inclusive, that more people be able – more people – more people be able to participate; the groups that are willing to use democratic means only – to rely on democratic means only, i.e., don't rely on any kind of violence, should have the opportunity to participate.

We hope that the Egyptian government will use domestic observers, international observers to help in this process. Believe me, this is a subject of much discussion between us and the Egyptians right now.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. I mean, I would say that there's been some speculation, especially with the president's speech at the U.N. where he was talking about balance of power – that balance of power, nations will not hold. So I think there's been some speculation, and before the president came to office, that he would reduce the American profile around the region. I think one of the things that we're finding is that that's a very difficult thing to do, and I think that we're finding this particularly in Yemen. I mean, I don't know – I'm curious. Was this – what kind of place did Yemen occupy in the thinking of the last administration? Or has this come as an absolute surprise, the Yemen issue?

MR. ABRAMS: Well, just for a minute on that. You can go back to the USS Cole. Yemen has been very much a matter of attention in the United States government for the better part of a decade. And if you look at things like the visit of President Salih here or the Millennium Challenge Account budget for Yemen or U.S. aid to Yemen, we've had a lot of discussions with the government of Yemen and we've had a lot of efforts to get that government to respond better to the needs of the Yemeni people.

And I would say it's just been up and down and up and down. There have been moments where things looked like they were on the right road; for example, after the election, which was by local standards – meaning standards of the Arab world – a pretty good election. Someone was allowed to oppose President Salih and he was not jailed after the election. But then there were – the corruption problem is just one of the many problems. The jail escapes made it clear that either the government was not keeping its word or was simply unable to do so.

And meanwhile, as particularly the latter years of the Bush administration went by, it became increasingly apparent that our interests – or let me put it this way – our priorities and those of the Yemeni government were not the same, because our priority was terrorism. But the priority of President Salih was, perhaps not so surprisingly, President Salih; which is to say dealing with rebellion in the south, dealing with the Houthi rebellion. So you couldn't be sure, for example, where resources were – that you gave the government of Yemen were going to be put.

But I think what the Obama administration is now finding is this is an extremely difficult problem for us to solve, partly because of the different priorities of the government of Yemen, partly because it does not have certain capabilities we wish it had and that cannot be developed overnight. So this is going to be a problem that they have the whole time in office.

Q: Thank you. Steve Lande, Manchester Trade. A shortie and then a little longie, but both very short – relatively.

I always fear that Elliott Abrams or everyone should be in any book of heroes. I say this from a Democratic persuasion, because what he did was very gutsful. But The Economist wrote of somebody – one article, I never saw it again – some Iraqi who had the nerve after the war to say, maybe there should be friendly relations with Israel. His two sons were killed. They trashed his office. They never heard of him again. If Lee's aware of him, I'd appreciate that.

A more generic question is, does the Obama administration realize what Sen. Fulbright said many, many years ago, to the effect that the U.S. is a weakened power. It's not nearly as strong as it is – as it was years ago. We have new economic – we certainly have lost our throne there a little bit, and we certainly have China, India. Because most of the discussion of this group always is focusing on somehow we have the right to determine these events. Some of us believe that it's good that we talk about human rights but it should not really intervene in the policy unless we have an opportunity to have real influence.

I was one who was pushing U.S.-Egyptian free trade agreement, which I thought was a way to build relationships, off the table because we're angry about Mubarak's democracy. I

don't quite see the relationship between the two in the fact that I doubt that Mubarak was going to change his policy – very simple, to take a Niger and Guinea off of AGOA – the African Growth and Opportunity Act the other day. Not that that has any effect and makes us feel good.

So the question I would really ask, has anybody seen a realization, either in the Bush or in the Obama administration that maybe we have to talk a little bit quieter, we don't have the same stick we used to have, and so on, et cetera, in terms of the fact that we have less power in the world than we may have had even during the Russian period or certainly immediately after the Russian downfall? Thank you very much.

MR. WEINSTEIN: First, turn it to Lee.

MR. SMITH: Wasn't that Alusi? Was that who it was? Yeah. Mithal al-Alusi, yeah. I mean, he's still a figure in Iraqi politics as far as I know. Yeah.

I'll answer – I'll give my answer to the second question, and then I guess we can go down the line or whoever else wants to take on the question. Yeah. I mean, I don't – it doesn't – I don't know how you measure the U.S. decline. I certainly don't see it like that from my – I don't think that a lot of people in the region see it like that, that the U.S. is a declining power. I think that people believe that the U.S., as I do, has certain responsibilities.

I mean, again, the United States has been the strong horse, only intermittently challenged in that region over some 60-plus years. I don't think that we are less powerful there now than before. There are certainly some people who would like us to become less powerful, but I don't know how you measure that and I certainly don't believe it.

MR. ABRAMS: I'm just – very briefly on the Egypt free trade agreement. The problem is that you cannot start negotiating a free trade agreement – or I would say you should not – the day after the guy who runs against President Mubarak is jailed. I mean, the message of that to all Egyptians is we don't give a damn. And maybe that shouldn't be the message that is received, but it is the message we thought would have been received.

The only thing I would say about decline is I really agree with Lee and I would – I would go back to Charles Krauthammer's line that decline is a choice. Those who think the United States' position is significantly reduced, I would say look at Iran. The negotiations between Iran and the Europeans have been taking place for years and years and have gotten nowhere because the prize is us. And when – though the government of Iran is obsessed with the U.K., it's clear that the people of Iran are much more interested in the United States and in relations with the U.S. and in American support for democracy. So at that level, I think there's been no decline.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Steve Rosen?

Q: My question is to Jeff Feltman and it's about the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The administration has been widely criticized for overreaching when it demanded a complete settlements freeze in Israel and then appeared to back down to a degree.

And it's been said that it put Abu Mazen out on a limb, et cetera. Last week, Secretary Mitchell made another long reach when he seemed to promise a comprehensive peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians in 24 months; something that I think is widely questioned whether it's an attainable goal. Are we creating another limb that we and the Palestinians will climb out on together and not be able to deliver, and then have a problem of our own creation?

MR. FELTMAN: Let me make a comment on the settlement issue first, because the United States policy on settlements is longstanding. It predates this administration. It predates the George W. Bush administration. The United States government has had the same policy on settlements for a very, very long time. The call for a settlement freeze was consistent with the quartet roadmap that was presented to the Palestinians and the Israelis under the last administration. And it was also not presented as a pre-condition for negotiations. It was requested as something that was consistent with U.S. policy.

And we do think that the Israeli settlement moratorium is something significant, particularly if it is extended over a longer term, which is one reason why we think it's in the Palestinian interests to go into negotiations with the idea that perhaps that moratorium might be extended if you had viable negotiations going on over the long term.

I think we've all very – we all have to be humbled by the experience of decades of trying to help with an Israeli-Palestinian peace. If we talk about a timeline, I think yes, we're talking about our aspiration that we need to try to – we need to try to close this up. But we're also very, very aware of the difficulties; very, very aware of the history of this. So I wouldn't look at Sen. Mitchell's interview on Charlie Rose as a, quote, "deadline." What I would look at it as an aspirational goal to try to focus our attention, focus our partners' attention on getting back to the table and hoping to move forward.

MR. ABRAMS: Yes. I've written and I might as well say here, too. I think Jeff Feltman has given the best defense possible – (laughter) – of Sen. Mitchell's negotiating record. But he really ought to resign, because his record is one of failure for a year now, particularly starting with this – establishing the condition of total construction freeze, including Jerusalem, which everybody knows no Israeli government actually is going to accept; and which has had the unfortunate impact of kind of cornering President Abbas – or to use a different metaphor, putting him out on a limb from which none of us have been able to figure out a way for him to climb down without doing himself damage. So I think on this we disagree.

MR. FELTMAN: Could I – am I –?

MR. ABRAMS: Yeah. Please.

MR. FELTMAN: No. I think we do – I think we do disagree on this. And the – I go back to the fact that a year ago the Gaza War was just ending. And now we are at the point where we are talking about terms of reference with the two sides. I don't want to exaggerate this. This is not saying that we're suddenly at the negotiating table having wonderful breakthroughs.

But the fact that from – in a year you go from what was a very, very tough military security situation where you had rockets raining down on the Israeli civilian population, you had the Israeli army acting in Gaza, to a point where we're actually exchanging ideas on terms of reference for renewed talks – where you're having Arab foreign ministers coming to Washington to discuss with us how they can support the negotiating process. I think we have made – I think we have gone forward.

Q: (Inaudible, off mike) – all for the first time in 16 years that – (inaudible). The first time that the government of the Palestinians was – (inaudible) – sit down with – (inaudible) – negotiated with – (inaudible).

MR. FELTMAN: There were – there have been periods in the past, I think you're aware, where the negotiating levels have not spoken, for whatever reason. You know, the Gaza withdrawal is a good example where the Israelis acted unilaterally, when the Israelis refused to negotiate with the Palestinians in a way that might have empowered the moderates. Even now today, though, there are plenty of Israeli-Palestinian contacts going on; not at that negotiating level, but I assure that there are lots of contact going on even now.

We want to see negotiations start as quickly as possible. Elliott, thinking of your article today, "All Process, No Peace," I guess we're afraid that no process means more war. So we want to get back to negotiations.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Hussein.

Q: Thank you. Hussein Abdul-Hussein with al-Rai newspaper. My question to Ambassador Feltman is about the controversial decision from the Iraqi electoral commission by disqualifying more than 500 candidates, some of them Sunni heavyweights. Is there any American plan to rectify the situation? And maybe Lee can comment on how the United States can provide any sustainable effort if the U.S. has to go back every time for an election of a Lebanese president or to police the Iraqi elections and so on? Thanks.

MR. FELTMAN: Hussein, we believe that the Iraqi elections should be inclusive, that there should not be some sort of trumped-up political process that disqualifies candidates. We believe that the voters themselves should have the right to pick among candidates. Now, there are – some candidates perhaps haven't met the criteria for inclusion. But in general, we support inclusive elections. The Iraqi vice president, Adil Abd al-Mahdi, was here last week. He heard this from Obama administration officials at the very top on down about the inclusive sort of elections that we believe would be a credible, fair, transparent election process.

I think you saw that Vice President Biden was very actively engaged over the past couple days in talking about this. The U.N. Assistance Mission to Iraq – UNAMI – which is working on assisting with the elections, has made it clear to the Iraqis. I think the Iraqis politicians themselves are looking at this in a different way. The risk is that those elections end up not – the international community – that the Iraqis themselves can't endorse those elections. That's a very real risk. We believe that the Iraqi leadership is moving in the right direction on this issue now.

MR. SMITH: Hussein, can I ask you just to elaborate on the question a little bit? I'm not quite sure I understand. Thanks.

Q: I'm just questioning the sustainable – the sustainability of the U.S. effort. If the U.S. has to intervene in every issue, such as the elections of a Lebanese president or policing –

MR. SMITH: Right.

Q: – my question to Ambassador Feltman right now and many other issues, about the elections and otherwise in the Middle East.

MR. SMITH: Right. Yeah. I think it's not sustainable. We don't have the manpower, and the Middle East is not the only – is not the only region in the world where the United States has a serious – has vital interests. So no, I don't think that kind of effort is sustainable. But I think some sort of – I think a general framework is possible. And what are the things that matter – again, my general framework would be – my general framework would be to punish enemies and reward friends. Who are our friends? Who are our friends in the region and who are the enemies?

Again, I'm not a policymaker. These are the two gentlemen who have a good idea. But that's – and again, my problem is that we haven't – I feel we haven't done enough of that. We haven't done enough – often, we haven't done enough rewarding friends or punishing enemies.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Let's – over here.

Q: Firas Maksad, Lebanon Renaissance Foundation. Ambassador Feltman, it caught my attention that you spoke of the need to reassure our Iraqi allies, not just our Lebanese allies as we go to Damascus. I was for three weeks in the region and there seems to be almost unanimity amongst the political elite that the Syrians and the Saudis seem to be working to undermine Maliki, leading up to the Iraqi elections.

My question to you is where does that leave us with the Syrians, given that about a year ago, the Syrians were putting forward Iraq as the primary area of possible cooperation between the U.S. and Syria? But also, where does that leave us with the Saudis? And it speaks to our broader notion of how do we deal with those in the region that are undermining the American strong horse.

MR. FELTMAN: Firas, I don't think I'm revealing a state secret here when I say that we have been encouraging – under the Bush administration as well as in the Obama administration – the Saudis and Iraq's other Arab neighbors to basically get with the program; to recognize the fact that Iraq is becoming a leading powerhouse in the region again.

When you look at Iraq 10 years out and you look at these – at the oil contracts that are being – that are now being negotiated; when you look at the fact that you've got an electoral system that has a history – yes, it's has his hiccups – but there's an electoral system there that is developing strong roots. Iraq is going to be a strong leader in the region again. We believe that

it's in everyone's interest to understand that and to start embracing the Iraqi government now. This is not about who's in the government, who's not in the government. It's about the type of future of the Gulf – of the Gulf region that includes a stable, secure, self-reliant Iraq.

And I assure you that the Iraqi issues remain high on the agenda when we talk to – when we talk to the Syrians. If I talk to the Syrians, Lebanon goes higher, I assure you. (Laughter.)

MR. ABRAMS: Can I just add a point there? I think – there's this famous line or true story of, I think it was Kissinger with Chou en-Lai. Chou En-Lai says something and Kissinger says, if you believe that, then what do you think about the French Revolution? And Chou En-Lai says, it's too soon to tell. Well, I think there is a lot of truth to that with respect to Iraq. I hear a lot of people say – you know, talking about the huge disaster of Iraq. And I would ask you to come back in Jeff Feltman's 10 years and see if we can agree that it is a disaster or a success.

One of the things that President Bush thought about Iraq was that to have a successful and ultimately rich Arab democracy in the heart of the Middle East would have – Shia Arab democracy – would have a huge impact on politics in the Arab world and in Iran. And not only do I think that has not yet been proved wrong, I think come back in 10 years and it will have been proved right.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. I think that's a very interesting case. Keep in mind that this book and my ideas are sort of coming still at the heat of the moment. I mean, one of my main theses is that – as Hillel was discussing before, why I think it's ridiculous to look at us – meaning Americans, the United States – as the cause of most of the problems in the region because we're looking at a region that's very, very old. And we're looking at problems that predate the advent of Islam.

So along that historical timeline, yeah, I think it's probably way, way too early to figure out how all these different things will play out. And as Fouad Ajami has written I think very, very interestingly saying, look, I mean, the invasion of Iraq is probably going to have the same sort of ramifications as Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. Maybe. Maybe not. There's a – you know, we're working a very, very long timeline.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Abe Shulsky?

Q: Thanks. Abe Shulsky from Hudson. On the question of engagement with Syria. I just want to ask about one specific point, which was back in the summer there was a big attack in central Baghdad that included the foreign ministry, one of the worst attacks. And afterwards, Malaki was fairly strong in his statements about Syrian involvement. And as I remember, the White House reaction after that was, well, this is something between Iraq and Syria; it was a kind of distancing.

And I was just wondering, is this a kind of cost of the Syrian engagement? I mean, this seemed like a rather strange reaction for us to have when Malaki, who had been very cautious about ever blaming Syria for anything very often, made this rather strong statement and we kind of said, well, that's between those two elements. Thanks.

MR. FELTMAN: We don't want – we, the United States, do not want to further complicate the relationship between Baghdad and Damascus. That's one factor to take into consideration. But let me say that we continue to use all means to express concern, raise attention to the fact that there are still foreign fighters – terrorists – who are exploiting Syrian territory to carry out attacks in Iraq. The number is greatly reduced from what it was a couple of years ago, but nevertheless it still is happening and it still is a high priority issue for us with the Syrians.

Prime Minister Malaki also, after August 19th, called for the U.N. to come out and take a look and do its own assessment. And we were very supportive of Prime Minister Malaki's request to have somebody from the outside look at that August 19th attack.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Here.

Q: Thank you very –

MR. WEINSTEIN: Oh. Give it behind you and then you'll be okay.

Q: Pardon me?

MR. WEINSTEIN: The fellow behind you actually has got the mike and then you're next, okay? Sorry. Yeah.

Q: I've got it now. (Laughter.)

MR. WEINSTEIN: He's got the other one. Sorry.

Q: Thank you very much. Is it on? On Iran – my name is Mohammed Tapi Muslehi from Iran. The rapprochement that –

MR. SMITH: Don't go any further. That's fine. (Laughter.)

You actually come over here.

(Cross talk.)

Have a seat right over here.

Q: What a wonderful opportunity. This question is for Elliot and Jeff Feltman. Approaching Iran, negotiating with Iran, I hope that you gentlemen have – and the policymakers – have come to understand that this regime is the mother of all-time deception, dissimulation and I hope you have come to realize that. You will not get to anywhere.

President Obama, whoever gave him the advice to reach the regime and extend hand to that clinched fist which is full of Iranian blood – and it's even bloodier now after the June

election, or so-called election; they stole it, full of rapes and fraudulent. I hope that by approaching them and extending hand it gives them the legitimacy that they lost their legitimacy with the Iranian people.

We have paid with our blood, even in our shura day. December the 27th, a week after Ayatollah Montazeri died, 138 people were gunned down in the streets of Tehran alone. If you – you made a mistake in 1953. The American administration made a mistake by removing Dr. Mosaddegh. Now this time, if you just keep silent, quiet, don't extend hand, don't negotiate, don't give them the legitimacy, stay on the side of the Iranian people, help us to topple this nasty criminal regime and you will – actually, you will gain the credibility.

We're not looking for any kind of help from the United States or the Western countries. But keep silent. Don't try – you have been trying – Elliott, you remember during the Reagan administration gun – I mean, weapon for passages, the contra – Iran-Contra. You remember that.

For 30 years you have been trying to reach the government of Iran, these mullah who are the mother of all-time deception; they are criminals and it hasn't worked. Stay on the side of Iranian people by keeping quiet and silent. Just silent. That's all we want from you until we topple this regime, hopefully by June and – (laughter) – hopefully – and it will come along. It will come along. Believe me.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Thank you, sir.

Q: We are very determined.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Thank you, sir.

Q: Very determined –

MR. WEINSTEIN: Thank you, sir. Thank you, sir.

Q: – to do that.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Is there a question?

MR. SMITH: Definitely not a –

Q: Thank you.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Thank you.

Q: And I think you know, Mr. Feltman –

MR. WEINSTEIN: Thank you, sir.

Q: – I need to speak with you –

MR. WEINSTEIN: We'll catch –

Q: – come up with a good policy how to handle that and how to help us.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Thank you, sir.

Q: Thank you very much.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Thank you. Let's get the fellow if there's – is there a comment or –

MR. ABRAMS: Well, I just want to say I do agree that it is critical that whatever the United States does, we not grant legitimacy even in the eyes of the Iranian people, or especially in the eyes of the Iranian people. That is what I think is worrying about even the nuclear negotiations.

I'm not suggesting that we break off the P-5 plus-1 talks, but I would go back to the model of the way in which the Reagan administration handled the Soviet Union, which is to say that it was possible to have negotiations without abandoning the people in the gulag, as long as you were willing to speak candidly about the gulag, so that the people who were there knew which side you were on.

If we're going to have negotiations with Iran – which I think we probably are not because the ayatollahs don't seem to want it – but if we are going to have negotiations with Iran it is doubly important, even more important than it is today – and it's quite important today – that we make those – our moral position clear.

MR. FELTMAN: I'll just make – repeat something I said earlier. You know, there are a lot of states around the world, a lot of countries and international organizations that just say, oh, oh, oh, there must be a peace, there must be a peaceful resolution to this, a peaceful resolution to this. We all want a diplomatic resolution. But we were seen by many as part of the problem. So I wouldn't underestimate the fact that since the president has gone out of his way to try to engage and we've been completely rebuffed, that there's much more international consensus now about where the real problem is.

MR. WEINSTEIN: Okay. Now time for the last question here and then –

Q: Yes. Good afternoon. My name is Todd Wiggins. I operate under the pseudonym Urban Revival Media on YouTube. And this is only my second time here at the Hudson. I think I will return because your food is just as good as the libertarians. (Laughter.)

MR. SMITH: Have you tried the Quakers? (Laughter.) Wow. You'll never come back here again.

Q: I'm from an exotic Middle Eastern town, a port town called Baltimore, as you can tell by my accent. But I have a quick question for you, particularly to Mr. Lee Smith. Any time you

can produce a book that puts it all together as you seem to have done, I want to congratulate you on that.

I wanted to ask you, did you ultimately come down on one side or the other in retrospect with respect to Mr. Bush's administration decision to go into Iraq, which is obviously heavily criticized and part of the reason that he's no longer in town as much as he used to be. But I want to ask you, did you come down one side or the other or did you foretell that we would run into some of the issues that we've had with so many deaths and the catastrophe of our economy and all the other things?

MR. SMITH: Well, first of all, thanks for your kind words. And thanks for coming and enjoying the lunch. I mean, I think that the world is undeniably a much better place that Saddam Hussein no longer rules Iraq. I think there can be no possible argument about that. And certainly I couldn't have foretold the different issues that we would run into not just in Iraq but Iran and the region, and that's sort of what the book is about, that it's kind of my consideration of what some of the issues are in the region.

But again, I mean, I think it was – I don't believe in a scheme of cosmic justice but I do believe that there is a right and wrong and I do believe it was absolutely right to get rid of Saddam Hussein. I think the world is a better place, the Middle East is a better place, the Iraqi people are a better place.

(Applause.)

So yeah, I guess that's –

MR. WEINSTEIN: Great. That's a –

MR. SMITH: – a rousing –

MR. WEINSTEIN: – an appropriate rousing ending. I want to urge everyone to both purchase – you don't have to read the book, but it can't hurt. "The Strong Horse" by Lee Smith, Doubleday. Available out in the lobby for 20 bucks and online.

I wanted to thank our – I want to thank Lee for a wonderful presentation. I want to thank our panelists for an extraordinary discussion. Ambassador Feltman, we owe you one. Elliot, you're great as always. And Ambassador Feltman, when you do a book we'll invite Lee Smith back to comment on it and he can take the tough questions. And I also want to thank our event staff, vice president of communications, Grace Terzian, Ioannis Saratsis, Phil Ross – and thank you for coming. (Applause.)

(END)