

Senator TIM KAINÉ

Keynote Speech

00:00

Richard Clarke: It gives me extraordinary pleasure and honor to introduce you to tonight's keynote speaker. He is a man who I am honored to count as a friend and as my senator from the Commonwealth of Virginia, the man who chairs the Senate Committee on the Middle East, but he is a man who has spent a great deal of time in the Middle East. He's been to 15 countries in the region just in the last year. His definition of the committee and the senate in the Middle East is a little bit broader than ours at the institute, so he's been to the whole swath of the region, been to several countries many times since he's become the chairman.

He's a man who is known for his independence of thought even sometimes criticizing his own president and his own party. He's a man who is a man of many firsts. He was the first popularly elected mayor of the city of Richmond. Prior to that mayors had been elected by the city council. In the 400-year history of the commonwealth of Virginia he was the first Roman Catholic elected as governor and he is the first United States senator to ever give a complete speech on the floor of the United States Senate in a language other than English.

He's a man who's lived abroad and knows what it's like to see the United States from different countries around the world, a man who's sensitive to the needs of people in the developing world, a man who's sensitive to the needs of politics in the United States and a man who now has a great understanding of our region. So ladies and gentlemen, the senator from the Commonwealth of Virginia, the chairman of the Middle East Committee, Senator Tim Kaine.

[applause]

02:12

Tim Kaine: Well, good evening to all and please continue to eat, don't clink too loudly while I'm talking, but please continue. This is a warm and hospitable gathering. It's gonna be a wonderful evening. I'm so honored to be here. I want to thank Richard, Dick, for his kind comments, overly generous. I'm gonna be self effacing in some of my comments and be honest about what I know and what I don't know. And I feel like I'm in a room of wonderful experts. The Middle East Institute is a superb organization under the leadership of Ambassador Chamberlin. The addition of Ambassador Ford is huge for the institute. Dick Clarke is such a spectacular leader. This is an organization that is a very powerful one and I was incredibly honored, Wendy, that you had come and asked me to come and speak this evening.

Senator TIM KAINÉ

Keynote Speech

I said continue to eat. I'll tell you one story. I've had virtually every job in politics, city councilman, mayor, lieutenant governor, governor, national party chair senator. I can't keep a job. Don't worry about the title. Call me Tim. That won't change. The titles keep changing.

03:26

But one of my jobs was lieutenant governor of Virginia and I would hit a gavel at a dais just like this at noon every day in the senate of Virginia standing just like I am now and immediately I would have to watch every senator start to eat lunch. And I had to stand and work while everyone ate.

I got very good at that. I don't mind it at all. The only time I got cranky was at the end of our legislative sessions where I had to watch people eat lunch and dinner and then midnight snack while I was standing, but please continue to eat and let's enjoy ourselves and, again, to Wendy and Richard and all, thank you for including me.

This room is a room filled with professionals, filled with citizens of the world who have lived in, worked in, traveled in and care deeply about the Middle East and I'm humbled to be asked to offer a few words to you tonight.

I am the chairman of the Senate Subcommittee over the Near East, South and Central Asia. That is a title that I am proud to have and I've had it since August of 2013. But let me be honest with you and tell you how I became the chair of the subcommittee. And as Richard mentioned, in the senate parlance, Near East, South and Central Asian affairs, the fastest way to think of our region, which is a little different than the region that the institute covers, in the senate it's Marrakech to Bangladesh. Marrakech to Bangladesh, so it is a huge expanse of the world's real estate.

I have been to 15 countries in the region but, I'll be honest, how did I get to be the chairman of this important subcommittee? I talked my way onto the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I see my very, very good friend, Jim Moran. We're gonna miss Jim Moran in Congress so much, so much, please.

[applause]

Jim knows this story. As a new coming senator in 2013, I was put on the Armed Services Committee, which there is a traditional Virginia spot on the Armed Services Committee. I'm one of the few people in the senate who have a child in the military, so I was on the Armed Services Committee.

Senator TIM KAINE

Keynote Speech

I asked Senator Reid if I could be on the Foreign Relations Committee, my leader, and he said, "We don't put people on the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committee." And I said, "well, let me make an argument." And he goes, "okay, make an argument."

06:04

I said, "you don't have enough people on the Foreign Relations Committee who can speak every day to the 40 million Americans who speak Spanish in their homes." And so he said, "that's a pretty good argument. I'll put you on the Foreign Relations Committee."

I lived in Honduras for a year and I am fluent in Spanish. I'm no Cervantes but I'm fluent in Spanish and I stood up on the floor of the Senate and delivered the first speech that anyone had ever give on the Senate floor in a language other than English, which surprised me. I did not know that. But a month-and-a-half after I did that I became chairman of the subcommittee over not the western hemisphere but Near East, South and Central Asian affairs. How does that happen?

It happened because I was the junior senator on the committee and like the old Life cereal commercial, let Mikey try it, there was an attitude, and I'm gonna be honest about it. There was a little bit of an attitude of it's the headache zone. The chairmanship became open. Who should take it? Kaine's the junior guy. Let him take it.

I'm being honest here. I didn't become the chairman of this region because of my expertise, although I've had a passion about the region and I had traveled to the region before I was in the senate. I became chairman of the region because there wasn't anybody vying for the spot when the chairmanship became open.

And that's kind of an important beginning to my talk. This region, the region that the Middle East Institute focuses on, is so complicated and challenging but it's not a monolith. And while it's complicated and challenging, it is also the place of some of the most glorious history in the history of humanity and some of the most important allies that we have and, yes, some of the deepest challenges we have but also some incredible opportunities that are very palpable if we do the right things.

But all too often the Middle East is kind of lumped together in kind of a monolithic category and seen as the headache zone. And that's why for me, this last year plus of being on this committee and trying to lead it and working together with so many of you has been such a blessing, frankly, to me, because I have been able to take the awareness of I know this is not a monolith and I know that there's challenges but

Senator TIM KAINE

Keynote Speech

there's positives, too, and I've been able to get into it in more granular detail and meet so many wonderful leaders and understand even more deeply the challenges but also what some of the real positives are.

08:56

Certainly this region, the Marrakech to Bangladesh region of mine or the narrower region of the institute was formed to provide focus to, has some of the toughest, most challenging situations in today's world, certainly. But it also has some of America's strongest allies and some of our best opportunities going forward.

What I hope to do briefly and I know there's more business tonight. We're gonna have some wonderful award recipients and I know everyone wants to hear from them but let me just do a couple of things. I want to offer a few thoughts about from being a passionate citizen of the world, just as you are, caring about this region, just as you do, and 15 months as a subcommittee chair, offer just a couple of observations about the region big picture.

I want to talk about the current issue that is probably most on our minds in Congress as we talk about the region, which is the threat that ISIL poses. And I know tomorrow you have a very full day and this will be a significant point of discussion. And I want to finish in getting really specific about a passion of mine, which is trying to convince my congressional colleagues that action against ISIL should not just be about presidential fiat. It should only happen if Congress debates and embraces and votes on it. And I'm not gonna talk about the constitutional argument, but I want to say when that debate happens, and it will, I'm now convinced that it will, may not happen soon enough for me, there will be two strategic questions vis-a-vis an authorization on military action regarding ISIL that are important strategic questions for the moment but are also big picture strategic questions going forward about the role of America and the world and especially the interrelationship between America and this region. So let me talk about general, let me talk about ISIL and let me talk about the debate that we're gonna have about military authorization.

General, you know, and again, I'm humbled speaking to experts. Many, many challenges, many, many challenges in the region. There are challenges of the need for democratization to move forward and institution building, environmental challenges, military challenges, challenges of inclusiveness, challenges of respect for basic human rights, journalistic freedom and other human rights. So there's huge challenges and I don't want to spend a lot of time focusing on the challenges because I think that's what we do in this. We talk so much about the challenges and we almost talk ourselves into thinking that the Middle East is kind of just the challenge zone, just the headache zone. We know what the challenges are. We

could go country to country in the region. We know what they are, this room especially.

11:57

But let me do this. Let me talk about a couple of other things. Let me talk about the changing dynamics. Let me talk about the need to celebrate successes where we find them, both to encourage and accelerate them and to shine a spotlight on them so others can learn from them, and let me say a word about sort of looking for big breakthroughs.

Changing dynamics. So many changing dynamics, demographic and other dynamics in the region and even changing power dynamics between countries. Those things happen sort of with or without us, but one dynamic that is changing significantly that is on us is America's dramatically different energy profile.

You know, we have gone from net importer to soon net exporter and soon largest energy producer in the world. And that changes the dynamic of our relationship in the Middle East so significantly and so fundamentally and I'm not sure any of us in the policy world have really put our arms around and fully understood all the changes that will result because of America's energy revolution.

We had a major vote in the Senate yesterday about the Keystone Pipeline, but whether it's a vote on a particular project or not, we are rocketing forward in energy production, we are rocketing forward in new technologies and that changes our relationship to many of the nations, many of the nations that are in your purview.

And that changing dynamic, there's changing dynamics within the region, demographic dynamics, but the changing dynamic of US energy will be a key, key factor going forward. And certainly it causes significant concern among many nations that we have been traditionally allied with.

There is a sometimes inchoate and sometimes a spoken concern, maybe you won't need us so much and maybe if you won't need us so much you'll turn your back on us and you'll move away and you'll disengage. That would be a huge mistake for us to do as our energy profile changes, to disengage but the nature of the engagement will be very, very different.

So I know tomorrow as you talk, the changing dynamics in the Middle East region will be part of the discussion. But I would just put on the table that American energy policy, and we are gonna continue, frankly, to rocket forward. I deeply believe this. We are moving forward dramatically from heavy carbon to middle carbon to low

Senator TIM Kaine

Keynote Speech

carbon to no carbon in this country and it's a very good thing. And a lot of it is not being driven. Jim, I wish it was being driven because it was all policy decisions where we were really smart. Some of them are safe standard increases but some of what's happening is just American innovation moving us into a new energy place because there's business opportunities but also because of a concern about climate issues that affect my state so deeply. Hampton Roads, the second largest metropolitan area is the second most affected region in the country in terms of sea level rise. That changing energy dynamic is something to grapple with as we contemplate our relationship with the Middle East.

15:17

Second point I want to make is let's celebrate success. There's some great successes. Tunisia, I recently visited Tunisia and the country that sounded the opening gong on the Arab Spring had parliamentary elections last month that worked out in a pretty positive way. You know, we can't overestimate. We can't offer big picture predictions going forward but I think this is reason for applause.

[applause]

And there will be presidential elections soon that I also think are gonna... that are likely to work out in a positive way. And in Tunisia it was an Islamist party that after the initial brush of we want to embrace democratization, an Islamist party that was in majority power in Tunisia saw the situation devolving back to something unacceptable and said we will voluntarily step back from power and appoint a technocratic, in all the good senses of the word, government for a period of time. We will draft a new constitution. We will try to allow democratic institutions to flower. We will engage professional associations and labor in the civil society, not just the government, in making this happen and they're making it happen. And the possibilities of this moving continually towards success and then being a great example of a Muslim nation that is embracing small 'd' democratization and doing in a way that is inclusive and respectful of multi-parties and multi-traditions, it could be a game changer.

Now, again, we can't put too much weight on the shoulders but so far there have been good steps forward. Who's hearing about Tunisia as we're talking about the region right now? Who's hearing about this? Who's hearing about advances in Morocco or advances in other nations? There's no nation that I could bring up anywhere in the world, including the United States, where someone couldn't point out a counter-trend, right?

Senator TIM KAINÉ

Keynote Speech

But when there are positive trends we should be celebrating them because part of what we need to do is break through the superficial understanding of the region that kind of says the Middle East is a monolith and the Middle East is a problem zone. There's some great opportunities moving forward and so the second thing I would say about the region is there are successes and it's up to all of us and no one knows them better than you to try to celebrate the successes.

18:00

And the last point I want to make before I move to ISIL and the authorization is let's look for real breakthroughs. Now, there's an opportunity for a breakthrough on the table right now and we're here in the week and my mind is very focused on the negotiations with Iran over their nuclear program.

Those negotiations will lead to a deal or will lead to no deal or will lead to we're not there yet, we need to continue to talk, right? So those are the three options and I'm not gonna handicap them. I had two meetings about this today. Come this weekend we will see what the outcome is and then we'll have to grapple the United States and other nations with this. But the prospect and the work that Secretary Kerry and others in this country have done, and the other nations as well, to really go after a relationship, and I'm talking now about the relationship between the United States and Iran, that has been characterized by deep, deep mistrust for decades, the prospect of even trying to find a deal that could lead to an Iran without nuclear weapons is a potential for a breakthrough.

Most change in life is incremental advances toward goals and it is very important to find leaders who know how to incrementally advance to goals. I did that as a mayor. I did that as a governor. But I'm not sure as a mayor or governor I ever was part of a breakthrough that really changed the paradigm.

We are engaged in the best tradition of American diplomacy in an effort to find a breakthrough right now. We may or may not find it. But we should never hesitate to try to find breakthroughs. And the discussion with Iran over their nuclear program, you know, some criticize the president for even going down the path of trying to find a deal. Some didn't like the notion of an interim deal, their view, and I viewed this as naïve, is, you know, do a final deal or don't do anything. In relationships characterized by mistrust, you cannot do a final deal or nothing. You have to do interim steps where each side has some obligations and each side can test whether others meet the obligations.

So we are gonna have a challenging discussion about this in Congress and in the country and in the globe and in the region that deal, even the most positive deal, will

scramble things within the region and change the dynamics in ways that will be very, very difficult and I know this will be a topic of the discussion and how timely this forum is.

20:48

But in the region, we need to look for breakthroughs. We need to push for breakthroughs. We need to be candid enough to acknowledge if we can't reach them, we can't reach them, but we can't hold our ambitions back and we can't hold our aspirations back to really find paradigm shifts and we're in a week where we're talking about something that would be a huge paradigm shift.

Move real quickly and talk about ISIL and then what I think Congress needs to do. The threat posed by ISIL in my view is a very serious, significant growing one. ISIL right now does not, in my view, pose an imminent threat to the United States but the threat it poses to us, to our allies, to our friends in the region is serious and growing. I don't think I'm saying anything that would be hugely controversial in this room.

The controversial point, the challenging point is what the response of the United States and the global community should be. It should not be a purely military response. There's no purely military response to this threat that will be successful. I am of the belief that there are military responses that are, indeed, necessary if they're appropriately defined. But there is no purely military response to issues of radicalization. There is a deep hunger for opportunity. There's a deep hunger for democratization. There's a deep hunger for the end of corruption. There's a deep hunger for governments that don't, in sectarian ways, prefer some and deeply, you know, abuse others. That's all part of this. And so the solution cannot be a purely military solution.

I visited with Senator Angus King of Maine, who's a great colleague in the Senate. We visited the Al Udeid Air Force Base in Qatar in October to see the beginnings of a coalition effort to try to deal with this. And I'll just be candid, very nascent, very early but the extent of real coalition thinking and trying to think about what to do and when to do it and when to hold back and when to restrain and when to be strong, I found my observations of that decision-making to be... I was impressed walking away from it, many questions still, but I was impressed.

But I did come back with a very strong feeling, to move to my final point, that while the big picture strategy to deal with ISIL and to promote democratization and to promote opportunities, especially for young people working in tandem with nations in the Middle East, those are really the paramount things we should be doing. I do view and I agree with the president with the speech that he made on the evening of the

Senator TIM KAINÉ

Keynote Speech

10th of September that ISIL is a significant enough threat in their atrocities and things that have been deemed by the UN to be war crimes in Syria and their atrocities against women and beheadings of folks in a truly barbaric way.

23:57

I did come back even more convinced that a military element of the response is absolutely critical. I deeply believe that. But I definitely believe this as well. After 13 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is no way that the American public or members of Congress should allow a president of the United States, even a president that I like and consider a friend, even a president who has advocated a rationale that I find compelling, there is no way that we should allow a president of the United States to initiate a new war without a congressional debate and a vote, period. There is just no way this should happen without a congressional debate and vote.

If we've learned nothing else in 13 years since 9/11, we should have learned that thorough and vigorous debate between the president and Congress is what educates the American public. That debate is no guarantor that the decisions will be right. Let's be honest about that. But a full and vigorous debate and a congressional vote is more likely to produce a better result than unilateral presidential action.

When the president announced in early August after Congress had gone into recess that he was initiating air strikes against ISIL because they posed a threat to American embassy personnel in Baghdad and consulate personnel in Erbil, that was within the president's Article II powers to do, to defend the United States and our embassies under broad understanding to what presidential power is.

But by about mid August when the president said we need to go on offense against ISIL, we need to take steps to retake dams that are not threatening American personnel or we need to do important things for humanitarian purposes for Yazidi refugees, very important purpose, but not a threat to American life, we moved beyond a defensive mission where president can act unilaterally, to an offensive mission that needs Congress.

We've got to have Congress step up and engage in this debate and have a vote and I am so discouraged that once we moved into an offensive mode that we in Congress did not do that. We took a seven-week break before the mid-term elections without saying a mumbling word in Congress about this war and we're, according to recent announcements in the House that I've heard, there's a hope in the House to adjourn on the 11th of December. I know the holiday vacation most

Senator TIM KAINÉ

Keynote Speech

Americans get. There's an effort to adjourn on the 11th of December possibly without dealing with this issue.

26:47

It would be a huge mistake for us not to have this debate and to have it as soon as possible and ask tough questions and pepper the administration. The administration should send up their own version of an authorization and we should have the debate in full view of the American public and have to declare, as members of Congress, whether we will put our stamp on this mission.

We should do it because constitutionally that's required but the main reason we should do it is because we're asking people to risk their lives in a military action. We've already had two deaths of American combat personnel in this action against ISIL. So if we're asking people to risk their lives, it seems like we should do our job. We should do our jobs and we should do them before we adjourn and go home for the holidays.

Let me just conclude and just say two things when we get to that debate. For awhile I wasn't sure we would even debate it. I was worried that Congress was basically gonna roll over and let the president do this without Congress. I now believe that Congress will take it up. It may not be soon enough to satisfy me. I do think we'll take it up.

As we take it up, there are gonna be two elements of the debate that are important with respect to ISIL and the battle against ISIL but I think are gonna be debates long-term kind of about American foreign policy in the region and more globally and I just want to bring these to your attention and maybe some of your speakers tomorrow could get into these.

The first is this debate that we'll have about whether the mission should include opportunities, should exclude ground troop operations or should be broad enough to include potential ground troop operations.

This is a huge debate about ISIL but it's also a huge debate about the efficacy of American ground operations in the Middle East, and to use a phrase that was spoken by Secretary Gates when he gave his speech at West Point as he finished his time as Secretary of Defense, you know, he said, "the next time a president, a Secretary of Defense comes to the president and says, 'we ought to get involved with significant ground troops in the Middle East, Africa or Asia,' the president should say to the Secretary of Defense, 'you need to see a psychiatrist.'"

29:09

Now, Secretary Gates, who had served multiple presidents of both parties was summarizing up everything he had learned when he said that in his speech and he's made similar comments in his autobiography. But the efficacy of American ground troops, who are the best at what they do, but in challenges of the kind we're dealing with ISIL or the kinds of challenges we're dealing and likely to deal with around the globe, is a really important debate that we need to have, a really important debate that we need to have.

My predecessor in the Senate, Senator Webb, was very concerned about America as an ally and partner versus America as an occupier and the greater the ground operation, the greater the likelihood that the actions of the United States could be seen to merge from ally and partner against extremism, against violence to occupier.

So you'll see us have that debate about ground troops and it's not just about, well, ground troops are unpopular, so this is a political debate. No, it's a fundamental debate about the efficacy of American ground operations that will speak a lot about the region and the world.

The second issue that we'll debate and I've already, as even walking up to the front of the room I'd talked with some folks about it, is as we consider about what we should do and whether to authorize military actions against ISIL, what should we do about the government of Syria? Within the pro authorization camp in the Senate, there are those who want to authorize action against ISIL and go on to authorize some action against the current governor of Syria committing humanitarian crimes of significant, of huge significance.

There are others who say, frankly, that regime change, no matter how brutal the regime, no matter how many humanitarian crimes a regime is perpetrating, a regime change should not be official policy of the United States. And you will see the debate about the battle against ISIL and in particular, what do in Syria, you will see a very significant internal debate about Syria around this issue of the current government of Bashar al-Assad I voted for military authorization Foreign Relations Committee in August of 2013 to use military action to punish the Assad regime for using chemical weapons against civilians.

The president's proposed mission was to deter the use of chemical weapons against civilians. If the president's proposed mission had been to change a regime of a country, I would have voted against it, but to punish and deter the use of chemical weapons against civilians, I voted for it.

32:04

You're gonna see that debate as a significant debate, what to do vis-a-vis Syria, as complicated as Iraq is, Syria much more complicated, obviously, and you're gonna see that debate, but it's a debate that's not just about this issue but that it's more broadly about how we should look at these conflicts going forward.

Let me say this and sit down. I mentioned that the region is a complicated region and it's not a monolithic and we should celebrate success. The challenges that we have on our shoulders in terms of how we respond to issues are complicated. The answers are not simple.

The world needed us very desperately in the 20th Century. The world needed the United States and we stepped up to it. You know, I think as a Virginian, about the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War, in 1865, Appomattox coming up in April, and the reunification of our nation, no one understood it at the time, but the reunification of the United States was necessary because the world needed us in the 20th Century. Had we not unified in 1865, the work that was on the table that we were required to do in the 20th Century would not have been done. It would not have been done. We could not have done it. We could not have sorted out the decaying monarchies that had led into the death spiral of World War I and we could not have played a pivotal role in the defeat of fascism in World War II had we not reunited. The world needed us.

And in the 20th Century, in an odd sort of historical convergence, the US economy became the largest economy in the world. Our military became the most powerful military in the world. Teddy Roosevelt decided we'd quit being isolationist and try to be diplomats to broker the end of the Russo-Japanese War and get involved in diplomatic efforts that weren't necessarily our fight but we would try to be peacemakers in the world. Military strength, economics strength, diplomatic strength, those things merged in the 20th Century and we played an important role.

We have an equally important role to play in the 21st Century. The nations are different. The challenges are different. The way we will play it is different. But the one thing that I think is similar is that we will not play our role well if we don't try to balance the spheres, military strength, economic strength, diplomatic strength, strength of a moral example.

When we lean too hard on one sphere, military strength for example, we don't play the leadership role that we are supposed to play. When we try to balance across the spheres, as we did in the 20th Century in very different circumstances, we achieve the leadership role that we're supposed to play.

35:03

And the work of the institute is not just to focus on a region but it's also to put pressure and encourage us to balance the spheres of diplomacy, military strength, economic strength, strength of our moral example. We need that encouragement deeply because we have a tendency to lean too hard on one pillar or the other and you and organizations like you have a way of not only focusing on a region that's important but encouraging us to balance the spheres in the right way. And we need you.

Thank you for having me tonight and it's a thrill to have a chance to come and offer some thoughts.

[applause]

36:02 Transcript ends