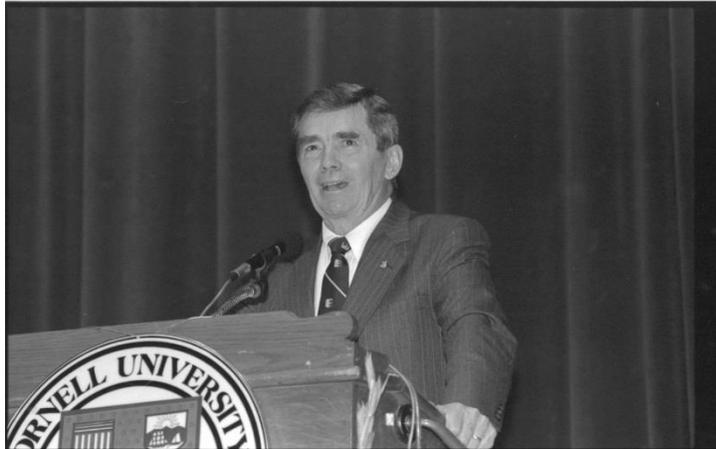


Bruce Laingen

Former U.S. Chief of Mission in Iran



L. Bruce Laingen Bartels lecture

Summarized by Govind Acharya and Karin Shankar

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Laingen introduces his lecture by contextualizing his time spent as a hostage (in the US Embassy in Iran) in the broader Middle East scenario—especially Lebanon (where other hostages are being held), the Israel – Palestinian dispute and Iranian revolutionary fervor. Thus, as he notes, “regrettably, it is a region that challenges this country enough to keep diplomats busy for decades and well into the future.” But, he sees optimism, especially in Afghanistan, which the Soviets are withdrawing from. Afghanistan might start to shake itself from Soviet imperialism and move towards peace. Iraq and Iran are moving towards peace, which would imply that the Persian Gulf region is becoming more stable. And, with the intifada now in its 11th month, “a new set of circumstances that opens the possibilities of change in the positions of both Israelis and Arabs” might lead to peace.

The interests to America, Laingen notes, are obvious, but sometimes exaggerated. We still have the “cold, hard economic terms, resource terms oil terms, and related to that, a strategic interest in preventing, paramount at least, Soviet influence in the area, at cost to us.” But, there are also a “range of political and moral interests with respect to the State of Israel and other Arab states as well.” These interests aside, “we are still the country in the Middle East to which the parties can look to play an outside role better than any other country can when there is room for that kind of role.”

On Iran, he argues that “we cannot strike from our consciousness, it is strategically key.” But, “the revolution is there to stay, in our lifetime, at least in its essence is clear.” Laingen goes on to develop an analysis of the Iranian political climate, noting that the fervor of the Iranian revolution will diminish somewhat after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. He notes that even though he was a former hostage in Iran, he believes that “we have to get beyond the hang-ups of our ‘hate Iran’ syndrome that is still with us, regrettably.” But, we should not be negotiating with them about terrorism and hostages.

On Israel, he believes that it is a requirement that Israel must give up the lands it occupied in 1967 to the Palestinians. He says that “time is not in Israel’s favor.” He also believes that “the terrorism will not be reduced in its fundamentals until and unless there is beginning and hopefully a resolution of the

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Palestinian issue.” We should not be too optimistic, he argues, because of “their tradition of never having lost a chance to miss opportunities for peace when they arise.”

Laingen then discusses what he calls “some essentials that ought to govern our own policies.” The first of these is that “diplomacy will and should have center stage.” The second is the “need to challenge conventional wisdom.” The third is “to be wise enough to appreciate that in today’s world there are limits to our power to impose our will.” The fourth is “the need for patience.” The fifth essential is “our greatest strength on the world scene is that we are a democracy; a society resting on regard for human rights... not always perfect by trying.”

He ends by noting that we ought not to get caught in “a kind of terrorist syndrome,” where “we not allow terrorism to dominate our approaches to the Middle East, to preoccupy us from focusing on the origins of a lot of that terrorism and that it is the political issues that need the attention foremost above all.”