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The New Republic's
Symposium on Public Policy

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A DISCUSSION PRESENTED BY
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MS. SANDBERG: Good morning. We're going to go ahead and get started.

I'm Stephanie Sandberg. I'm president and publisher of The New Republic magazine. I'm very happy to have you all here with us this morning.

This is another in our continuing series of symposia on public policy. And today we're going to talk about foreign policy, and specifically the future of bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. We'd like to thank our sponsor, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Lawrence Kaplan, our moderator, who is a New Republic senior editor, will guide the discussion this morning. They'll speak for a while, probably for about an hour, and then he'll open up for questions from the floor. So I'll turn it over to Lawrence. And thanks.

MR. KAPLAN: Hi. My name is Lawrence Kaplan. On behalf of TNR, I'd like to welcome everyone to today's session, which is the latest installment in The New Republic's Symposium on Public Policy. The topic of today's discussion is the future of U.S.-Saudi relations, and specifically the contours of those relations as they stand today in 2004.

Of course, for roughly six decades the contours of those relations were fairly straightforward. I think we had a quid pro quo with the Saudis where, in exchange for basing rights and access to oil, the United States more or less turned a blind eye to what went on inside Saudi Arabia's borders. The question is, how much has that changed today? And specifically, are counterterrorism, settling the situation in Iraq and political reform in the region the new pillars of U.S.-Saudi relations?

And to answer that question we have a panel of distinguished guests; among them Peter Mandaville, who is an assistant professor at George Mason University. He is also the director of the Center for Global Studies at GMU. He's most recently the author of "Transnational Muslim Politics; Reimagining the Umma."

We also have with us today Thomas Lippman, who is an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute Mr. Lippman was previously the Washington Post Middle East correspondent. He's the author of, among other books, "Inside the Mirage; America's Fragile Relationship with Saudi Arabia."

We also have James Placke, a former career U.S. Foreign Service officer, who, among other things, served as deputy assistant secretary of State for Middle Eastern affairs. Today Mr. Placke is a senior associate at Cambridge Energy Research Associates.

Finally, we have my colleague Leon Wieseltier, who is a literary editor at TNR and the author of, among other books, "Kaddish," which I think previewed many of the themes teased out in "Reimagining the Umma." (Laughter.)

But why don't we start by --

MR. : Kaddish before 9/11.

MR. KAPLAN: Right. Right. Why don't we start with any introductory remarks and thoughts that the panelists have, specifically on the questions of has the nature of the U.S.-Saudi relationship truly changed as it stood before 9/11.

Would anyone like to pick up? Okay.

MR. LIPPMAN: I'd like to talk a bit about the trajectory of the relationship. I think that would be a good way to --

MR. KAPLAN: Okay. That's great.

MR. LIPPMAN: Good morning, everyone.

As our host mentioned, I set out after 9/11 to examine the entire history and nature of the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, which I did in my book. And even I, who had been to Saudi Arabia many times and had been a correspondent in the region for The Washington Post, was astonished at every step of the research about the complexity, the breadth and the depth of the historic relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, to the point where I think that, contrary to what most people believe, it's fair to say that there's no aspect of life in Saudi Arabia today, other than religion, that hasn't been profoundly and directly impacted by the relationship with America, Americans and American institutions going back even to before the oil contract, the oil concession was signed in 1932.

Now obviously, as everyone knows, the relations have taken a pounding over the past couple of years because of 9/11 and because of the war in Iraq. But there's a paradox, in that the bilateral relationship between the governments is quite good today, and you'll hear American officials from the State Department, the Treasury Department and the security agencies talk about how the Saudis got serious about terrorism after the attacks on the housing compounds in Riyadh. But the other aspects of the relationship, between people and between nongovernmental organizations and institutions, are deteriorating quite rapidly, and my colleagues will talk about that.

The downfall of Saddam Hussein enabled the United States to remove its troops from Saudi Arabia without appearing to have capitulated to the terrorists in Saudi Arabia, which -- and it was good for both countries. But the irritants really outweigh the positive signs. I mean, the Saudis are deeply resentful of the kind of unrestrained Saudi-bashing that's gone on in this country for the past couple of years, as exemplified by the Michael Moore movie and the State Department suddenly including Saudi Arabia in the religious freedom report, and the giant lawsuit against members of the royal family that's proceeding through the U.S. courts. And it sometimes seemed to me that John Kerry was running against the House of Saud as much as he ran against the House of Bush. And of course -- and there's deep anger throughout Saudi Arabia about the American support for Israel and what's happened in the intifada.

And meanwhile the actual American presence in Saudi Arabia has diminished somewhat because of security concerns. And fewer Saudis are coming here, some because they don't want to, some because they can't get visas, and some are apparently moving money out of the country.

But the real decline in relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia has nothing to do with either 9/11 or Iraq, and it can be traced back into the 1990s. The relationship probably peaked in the early 1980s, when you had Americans, under the auspices of the Joint Economic Commission -- run by that man -- you had literally hundreds of Americans, American civil servants, officials of the United States government, seconded directly into Saudi Arabian government agencies, working side by side with their colleagues and engaged with the Saudis in helping the Saudis learn how to do and to actually do all kinds of things. We even had people from the National Park Service over there helping the Saudis create their first national park.

You had huge military relationship at the time, military equipment flowing in.

And you also had enormous infrastructure projects. Saudi Arabia was still building itself. You had airports and hospitals and ports and military facilities being built, many of them by American corporations, such as Bechtel.

And in the past, Americans -- I have chapters on these things in my book -- Americans have been deeply and intimately involved in agriculture, which is a big business in Saudi Arabia, the second- largest component of GDP. And Americans ran the farms at Al-Kharj for years. Americans were involved in the evolution of the Saudi monetary system and wrote the charter for the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency. And Americans helped with the creation of paper money, which didn't exist in Saudi Arabia until the 1950s. Trans World Airlines created, managed, ran, maintained, crewed and staffed the national airline in Saudi Arabia for many, many years, for decades.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, NBC and RCA created the Saudi state television network. The Americans were deeply involved in running Saudi hospitals and clinics, through the Whittaker Corporation in California.

And all that continued to ramp up throughout the 1970s, as the money poured into Saudi Arabia from the oil price increases in the early 1970s. And you might say it sort of peaked with Desert Storm. It reached its apogee with Desert Storm, when American troops went in there. But the fact is that, first of all, Desert Storm turned out to have long-term negative effects on the relationship because of the resentment among the Saudi populace, not so much against us as against the fact that the House of Saud, having spent all those billions of dollars on military equipment, turned out to be unable to defend itself, even with American training. They still needed American troops.

But beyond that, if you go to Saudi Arabia today -- and I haven't been there since May, but it hasn't changed that much in six months -- if you go to Saudi Arabia today, you'll see that Saudi Arabia is now what you might call a mature society and country. The Saudis no longer need Americans to tell them how to run their airline, irrigate their crops, program their television, or remove an appendix.

In fact, one of my most recent trips out there, there were conjoined twins from Thailand -- had been brought to Saudi Arabia for separation surgery performed by Saudi surgeons in a Saudi hospital. Thirty years ago there were no doctors in Saudi Arabia.

And now you have a society with a population that is substantially educated. We can talk -- we can quarrel about the quality and the nature of the education, but a substantially educated population has much less need for the direct involvement of the United States in developing and running the country that you had for decades. And the result is a less intimate but what I would call a more normal relationship, based increasingly on business.

Now aspects of that, of the business relationship, are also in some trouble because of things that my colleagues will talk about, including Saudi anger and resentment over what they consider -- what they consider American overreaction to 9/11. Nevertheless, the United States is Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner and Saudi Arabia is the largest U.S. trading partner in the Middle East. The bilateral -- the volume of bilateral trade was $22.7 billion last year, heavily weighted in Saudi favor, of course, because of oil. But nevertheless, United States is a major supplier of electrical generating and transmission equipment, computers, transportation equipment and hospital equipment.

And if you look at the "Business Guide to Saudi Arabia" that's published by the U.S.-Saudi Arabian Business Council, you look at the membership roster and you'll see the huge American corporate involvement and investment in Saudi Arabia, and there's a big interest in the American business community in preserving this relationship because it is prosperous and it serves both countries.

And so I would say that over time, going back to the days when United States and Saudi Arabia first came together from opposite poles of the human experience back in the early 1930s, the relationship has worked well for both sides, and it is now in some jeopardy. I don't believe it will or should ever again be

what it was 20 years ago or 25 years ago, but in my opinion, it's well worth working to preserve and that the downward trajectory that we're on now can and should be reversed.

Thank you.

MR. KAPLAN: Peter or Jim.

MR. PLACKE: Well, Tom has focused on the sort of public aspect of the relationships -- that is, between people. I think I'd like to focus a bit more on the official relationship. And everything that Tom said I would certainly second.

I look at the Saudi-U.S. relationship as a three-legged stool. The three legs are oil, security and the Cold War, and they've all changed over the last decade.

Oil, of course, came first with the, as Tom referred to it, the concession agreement made between Saudi Arabia and what was then Standard Oil of California, now Chevron-Texaco in fact. That has been a cardinal element of the relationship throughout. But that has begun to change. Interestingly enough, it's because both parties are increasingly relying upon the market and less and less upon interventions of various kinds that have been exercised, particularly over the last 20 years.

The evidence of this is what's happened to Saudi oil exports to the U.S. Traditionally, Saudi Arabia maintained itself as the number one supplier of crude oil to the U.S. market, and they did so in part because they felt it was a strategic necessity to balance the oil and security aspects of the relationship. They relied upon the U.S. in many respects -- for military equipment, for military training, and ultimately, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, for physical security, protection. And the quid was a preferred position in the oil business.

Well, as the industry was largely nationalized in the early 1970s, including Saudi Aramco, established by the four one-time American partners, the relationship survived that. In fact, there continue to be an advantage conferred by the Saudis to the original Aramco owners as well as a -- often a subsidy, in a sense, of oil exports into the U.S.

To maintain itself as the number one supplier, Saudi Arabia simply priced its oil competitively to achieve that purpose, often foregoing 20 to 30 cents a barrel that they could have realized above that price by selling into the East Asian market. Well, that simply has changed. They're just not doing that anymore. And you can see it reflected in Saudi exports to the U.S., which began a fairly sharp decline in late 2002, continued through 2003 and into the middle part of this year, 2004. It's revived a bit for structural reasons that are a lot more detail than I think we need to go into for this purpose. But not only is Saudi Arabia now relying pretty much upon the market and selling increasingly into East Asia, and especially into China, where it is now the number one oil supplier, and I expect will continue to be, other aspects have changed as well.

In the open competition for gas exploration and development contracts that was adjudicated earlier this year, no American company walked away with a contract, and in particular Chevron, who is, after all, the original discoverer of oil in Saudi Arabia. And you would have expected in the old days there would have been at least one American company among those who were awarded contracts. Not true. You have the Russian company, you have the Chinese company, you have the French company, but you don't have an American company. And it was an above-board -- I think a very open and transparent process.

And Chevron simply didn't feel that what would be necessary to be competitive, given the bids of others interested, was simply not sufficiently rewarding to make that adjustment.

Well, once again, reliance on the market has left the U.S. out. Not only that, but the successful Chinese company is now negotiating with Saudi Aramco for a Saudi investment in the Chinese refining sector -- something that the Saudis have been interested in doing for close to a decade. That relationship is tightening on the oil front as the one with the United States is loosening.

Beyond that -- and this is particularly relevant today -- Saudi Arabia no longer as a matter of policy seems to be prepared to maintain a substantial reserve of unused capacity, oil-production capacity. It's expensive to do. It is not of material benefit to Saudi Arabia. It's of substantial benefit to the rest of the world because it's one of the stabilizers of the oil market. And the reason oil prices are so high today is that world capacity is just barely able to keep up with demand. And Saudi Arabia isn't quite tapped out, but very close to it. They're producing very close to their maximum capacity. They could produce more, but the kind of oil that is left is simply not the kind of oil that's being demanded in the market for motor fuels and kerosene and so on. So that key relationship has changed.

In a summary way, there are similar things that can be said on the security front. Tom referred to the Gulf War, which I would agree was the high point, and the aftermath in which the military relationship really began to go into a downturn. The U.S. was not always the best tenant at some of the military bases. And as you will have noted, at the end of the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. very quickly withdrew all of its operational forces from Saudi Arabia and relocated them to other places in the Gulf, especially in Qatar. So there is no operational U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia anymore. There's still military training. Military sales have fallen off substantially. So that aspect of the relationship has changed a lot.

The Cold War, of course, is over. That's not news to anybody. But it was a very important commonality between the two countries. There was not an identity of views, but a parallel of views. The Saudis were opposed to God-less communism, and the United States was opposed to the Soviet menace, and we made common cause very successfully. And perhaps the high point there was Afghanistan, for which the U.S. supplied military equipment through Pakistan to the mujaheddin and the Saudis paid the bill. And it was successful. The Soviets were forced to withdraw from Afghanistan. But what we ended up with -- and this is the law of unintended consequences -- was the Taliban. And we all know where that led. That was a not a fault of either of the two governments, but it grew out of what had been, at least initially, a very successful relationship.

So these three legs I would say today are all missing. Well, what does that leave us with? I think, in an ironic way, perhaps more than anything else, the war against terrorism. As Tom referred to, the Saudi government has clearly changed its view and has a new sense of urgency and necessity to deal with the war on terrorism because it's now visited Saudi Arabia in an unmistakable way and is a threat to Saudi security as much as it is to ours. And the level of cooperation has just mushroomed over the last year and a half. That's an area of common ground that's important to both of us, and I think there is a great deal of cooperation at the official level. But on the personal side, as Tom indicated, it's not percolating downward, so there is a problem underneath it.

One of the problems underneath is, of course, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian issue and the widespread resentment throughout the Arab world, and certainly in Saudi Arabia, of the U.S. position on the issue. You'll recall that last year Crown Prince Abdullah took an initiative to outline very concretely, much more so than I recall any comparable Saudi figure doing in public -- in private, yes, over many years, but not in public -- as to exactly what the relationship, in the Saudi view, between the Arab world and Israel would be if there was a genuine peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, and then also, of course, subsequently Syria and Lebanon. And he really painted quite an appealing vision, and not only that, he was able to sell it to the rest of the Arab world and it was adopted at a subsequent meeting of the Arab League. But it hasn't really gone anywhere, as has been commented upon in many forums.

The U.S., for the last four years, has essentially been inactive on the peace process. There is a road map, but there's no road and it's not under construction yet. It might be, subsequent to Yasser Arafat's demise and some other developments, including the recent U.S. election, but it remains to be seen. But I think that's an area that needs cooperation.

Saudi Arabia has uncharacteristically, judged upon the last 30 years, adopted a leadership position in the Arab world on the issue that the U.S. could well use as a point of cooperation to build a broader set of relationships to support a much more active peace process. And that I think would be received very well at the public level, certainly in Saudi Arabia and throughout the rest of the Arab world, and would begin to offset some of the negatives at the popular level that Tom referred to and articulated so clearly. I'll leave it at that.

MR. KAPLAN: Peter, would you like to add a brief comment?

MR. MANDAVILLE: Sure.

Well, good morning and "eid mubarak." I'd like to begin by kind of stating that I have a personal stake in all of this insofar as there is one part of me that's an observer and watcher of Saudi Arabia from Washington, D.C. and there's also a part of me that -- for whom this is my homeland. I was born in Saudi Arabia. I lived the first 25 years of my life in that country fairly regularly. My grandfather went there first in 1945, just after World War II. My father was raised there. So my family had a very close engagement with the kingdom over 50 years and three generations. And so there is a sense in which the future of the U.S.-Saudi relationship matters to me at least personally in addition to in purely geopolitical terms.

I think that Tom and Jim have given us an excellent overview of the geopolitical dimensions of what's going on right now. And I think I'd like to begin by pointing out that, as they both indicate, if we look at this situation purely objectively in terms of what's being done right now with regard to issues of terrorism and security; issues related to, as Jim points out, the presence of the Saudi oil reserve; in sober terms, in the cold light of day, objectively, Saudi Arabia really is working hard, making serious efforts to comply, and to make serious reform, legally in particular, on issues related to security and terrorism. That is absolutely going on. And yet, at the same time, there is this question mark that persists in lingering over the relationship.

So the question becomes for us, why? Why is it that, despite the fact that when we look at this situation, everything seems to be going the way it should in terms of the actual policy moves that need to be made to mend here, that this question mark persists? And to my mind, a lot of it has to do with looking at domestic politics within both the United States and Saudi Arabia in terms of understanding why it is that the war for hearts and minds on both sides remains problematic.

I think part of what we're seeing here, as both of our previous speakers have gestured towards, is a change in the rules of the game. But the game that's being played is not purely a geopolitical game whose rules are changing, there are rules changing within domestic politics in the United States post-9/11, and there have been a renegotiation of the rules of the basic social contract between the society of Saudi Arabia, between its population and the ruling elite in that country, and that's been going on since really the early 1990s. And there's a part in which the coming together, the confluence of these two rule-renegotiations I think are at the heart of a lot of the difficulties that are present here.

Let me push a little bit more specifically into the question of what's going on within Saudi society right now and the transformations and how they have an impact on how Saudis view the United States and the future of their relationship with that country.

As our earlier speakers have indicated, for many years there was a deeply enmeshed, close relationship between professionals in all sectors in the United States and the Saudi government and the Saudi Aramco, the oil company. Now, there's certainly been a change in this situation quite significantly. As has been pointed out, Saudis no longer rely on American engineers, American management knowhow. Over several generations, a generation of Saudi -- a very high level of Saudi managerial competency has been achieved, and increasingly there is not the reliance on American knowhow.

But when we go down beyond the fairly narrow band of Saudis who have had the benefit of that kind of training and exposure, there is a huge mass population whose role in this whole situation is not quite clear to them. This is the part of Saudi society that for the first 50 years of the kingdom's existence were largely brought in to the quid pro quo arrangement that Lawrence Kaplan talked about; the idea that the Saudi government and the royal family will provide for you, and in return, you will, in a sense, acquiesce in granting and recognizing that family's legitimacy. There would not be politics in Saudi Arabia as we understand the term.

However, from the early 1990s onwards, the situation in Saudi Arabia, particularly when you look at fiscal matters, coffers, management of public funds, et cetera, it became very clear that those rules could no longer sustain; the system was not going to tick along as normal. The tensions that were present in terms of the demographic divide in the country, where, you know, some 70 percent of the country's population is under the age of 15, things were changing and the rules of the game had to change as well.

It used to be the case, for example, that any Saudi citizen that graduated from university was guaranteed a job in the government bureaucracy. By the 1990s, that government bureaucracy had swollen to such levels that salaries simply could not be sustained, and so this program was broken off. Subsidies were reduced. Taxes on things appeared. And so you suddenly had a large portion of the Saudi population that kind of wanted to say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Hang on a second. What's happening? This is not the system as we understand it to work. Taxes? What are you talking about? What's that? What do you mean I don't get my government job? You know the rules; I went to university, I've completed, I've given my dues, where is my job?"

For the first time you had a serious unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia, and a lot of people who wanted to start asking questions about the rules of the game, but who had no meaningful spaces in which they could do so. Public life in the form of open journalism, voluntary association, was not present. And so you had the burgeoning at that time of a fairly small but thriving underground political community who turned towards Islam as a mobilizing discourse, as a vocabulary of resistance against what was increasingly seen as unjust rule by the royal family.

Now as many of you are aware, there was an entire cottage industry of Saudi-watching that grew up, particularly in the 1990s, and so much flying back and forth in policy journals and outlets about will the Saud hold on to the situation; what will happen in the succession; when Fahd dies, what this, what that.

If there's one thing that the Saudi royal family has proven itself very good at doing, it's finding a way of muddling through, of maintaining the status quo, and of managing, I think, successfully, fairly complicated situations, such as this.

What happened with 9/11, however, put new pressures on top of the situation internally within Saudi Arabia that had just started to improve. By the 1990s, it was clear that a mode of management had been found. The system would be held together.

The current de facto ruler of the country, Crown Prince Abdullah, I think, has proven himself to be -- despite early concerns in the 1990s that he would take a sort of geopolitical orientation that was more autonomous of the United States and perhaps even mildly anti- American, he's proven himself to be, first

and foremost, a pragmatist in terms of managing this relationship and also to be cognizant of the fact that things in Saudi Arabia would have to change, the rules of the game would have to change, and began processes of putting in place, slowly and gradually -- and I think this is a point that isn't -- sometimes not understood in the United States as well as it needs to be -- the nature of Saudi society is such that you can't simply overnight renegotiate the rules of the game, make wholesale dramatic changes to laws relating to, for example, the role of women in society and politics, and expect something good to come out of it.

The royal family began to realize that there would have to be some loosening; certain spaces in which voices previously wholly excluded from politics could be heard would have to be created. And we began to have experiments in that direction, not only, obviously, with the Majlis al Shoura, but in the notion of a national dialogue, moves towards implementing local-level elections and slowly, at a very gradual rate, the opening up of spaces in which Saudi citizens would have the opportunity to put forward views on the direction of the country.

Then 9/11 happens, and a huge wedge appears in the moves that had been forming towards a consolidation of the state-society relationship in Saudi Arabia itself and the U.S.-Saudi relationship more specifically.

In the eyes and the imagination of the average American, there was not much known about Saudi Arabia. There had been this war in 1991, which many Americans understood in terms of oil and also understood in terms of the triumph of the United States in the Cold War, the ability of their country to play a role in the world and to be present in the world in a way that it could not during the Cold War.

Since the 1990s, as the '90s rolled through, increasingly, I think, in the American imagination, as the specter of Osama bin Laden appears on the scene, there tends to be more and more of a sense in the popular American imagination of Saudi Arabia as a place where that person is from, Saudi Arabia as something problematic.

Then when 9/11 happens, and you have the iconic event or iconic fact of 15 of 19 hijackers being Saudi citizens, this really becomes a fundamentally pathological problem.

Now of course, ironically enough, this is exactly the result that a bin Laden or al Qaeda is looking for. This fits very nicely with their geopolitical vision. You can imagine bin Laden as -- you know, sitting in a cave somewhere, rubbing his hands with glee as he watches the U.S.-Saudi relationship go exactly the direction he planned it to.

Fifteen of 19 hijackers. Coincidence? No, of course not. Indicative of the fact that 15 of 19 Saudi citizens would like to cause bodily harm and destruction to the United States? No, not true either. Fifteen of 19 hijackers. Why? Because it's a brilliant tactical move on the part of bin Laden.

In that sense, the souring of U.S.-Saudi relationships is exactly the sort of geopolitical effect that was trying to be achieved. And in that sense, the appearance of and the snowballing of crisis in the relationship over the ensuing months and last couple of years has, in a sense, been the fulfillment of the bin Laden vision. And in my sense, at least, all the more reason why we need to sit back with level and clear minds and take a look at the importance of the relationship which, as I've started by saying, in purely objective and geopolitical terms, looks to make important sense moving forward.

Where I'd like to start to conclude and wind down in my comments is to talk a little bit about what the nature of the relationship moving forward is going to be. Clearly the rules of the game are changing, and there has to be some sort of a renegotiation in how that works. The question to my mind -- the primary question, then -- is if Saudi Arabia is going through and will over the next generation go through this very complicated and difficult process of social transformation whereby there will be a new state compact, a new

social contract between the Saudi society and the Saudi ruling family, that will be renegotiated and that is potentially very, very messy.

The sort of doomsday scenarios that some of the Saudi-watchers spin out for you of the whole system exploding and falling apart in the next two years, I don't buy into that. The past history doesn't suggest that such a thing would come through. But they are pointing to the fact that there is going to be a very difficult period ahead. The question then becomes, how can the United States help Saudi Arabia to manage that transformation most effectively and in a way that preserves and protects U.S. interests in the region and in the world? To me, the question comes down to how it is that the United States can help Saudi citizens to have some sense of stakeholding in the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia.

And to invoke the notion of a Saudi citizen, while it may seem kind of obvious common sense -- yes, these are people who have Saudi passports; they're citizens -- the notion of citizenship usually carries with it the sense that you are invested in a national project, a thing out there called Saudi Arabia that you feel yourself belonging to.

Part of the issue, I think, in the first 50 years of the relationship has been that most Saudis haven't really understood themselves to know what being Saudi means. What is that about? What does it mean to be a Saudi Arabian, to be a citizen of this country? What values does that mean? What role do I have in creating and constructing this thing? Insofar as both our previous (guests ?) have pointed out, there was tremendous reliance on foreign labor and foreign expertise in setting up the infrastructure, of building Saudi Arabia. There hasn't been, for many Saudis, a direct sense of me as part of making this country. And that itself, that fact alone I think is part of what's having to be dealt with and negotiated right now.

In that sense, to most Saudis, those who are not in fairly elite government positions, the United States is not necessarily something that they know very well or have much firsthand experience of, and something that, from the 1990s onwards, they began to understand, as Tom and Jim have both pointed out, as something problematic: people who sent troops here because our government -- to defend us, people that we rely on to have a place and way in the world, and this is not good. What needs to be done then, I think, is to help the Saudi government to manage this transformation process most effectively, and I think that's going to mean, yes, continuing to talk about things like educational reform, political reform, but being realistic about that.

For example, the placing of Saudi Arabia on the State Department's international religious freedom concern list, this simply has many Saudis perplexed. They didn't know how to deal with the fact when suddenly American diplomats showed up and started asking them questions about treatment of religious minorities. What are you talking about? We've -- nothing has really changed on this front for the last 60 years, and now suddenly you're raising this as an issue. This isn't part of how it works, folks. These are not the rules of the game. And in part what's being communicated is, well, the rules of the game are going to have to be changed. And that's fine, but do that together, work out that renegotiated compact together and try to not politicize this quite so sharply and in a way that prompts and moves towards crisis.

When it comes towards issues of democracy, elections, involvement of women in politics, absolutely. But you can't just snap your fingers and bring sweeping change to a country such as this. We're talking about a country one to two generations removed from primarily a nomadic, pastoralist lifestyle, and you can't simply expect there to be democracy overnight. Get rid of that term. Start talking more -- more realistically and less ambitiously in terms of the emergence of participatory politics in different forms rather than the big D-word itself.

So in a sense where I'd like to end is to say that I think what needs to be worked on is helping Saudi citizens, those who are and will over the next generation have to start playing according to these new rules,

help them to begin understanding why the U.S.-Saudi relationship makes sense for them now and in the future, rather than that being a pathological vestige of the old rules of the game.

Thank you.

MR. KAPLAN: Thanks, Peter.

And just to recap, we've heard that the fault for the deterioration in the U.S.-Saudi relationship lies more in Washington than it does in Riyadh. We've heard testimonials to the seriousness of Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism efforts. We've heard more or less that in every arena save religion, which to me at least seems to be a rather big exception, that change has been the order of the day in Saudi Arabia. Does this narrative square with your understanding of, A, the state of the U.S.-Saudi Arabian relationship; and, B, with events as they stand on the ground in Saudi Arabia?

MR. WIESELTIER: That's a trick question. I've been an amateur but intense student of the Middle East and of American foreign policy for a long time, but I am by training a historian of religion, a historian of medieval religion, of medieval Judaism and Islam and Christianity. And what I'd like to do is offer just a few comments, general considerations about the importance or the diminishing importance or actually the question of the importance of the Saudi- American relationship to American foreign policy, and then bring the discussion over to what really, I think, is the most significant question facing the relationship, which is the most significant question facing Saudi Arabia, which is the cultural and social and religious flexibility of Saudi Arabia, what can be and what cannot be expected in the sort of transformation that my colleague has been talking about?

It is -- and whereas, you know, I yield to no one in my contempt for Michael Moore, not every criticism of Saudi Arabia can be described as Saudi-bashing, restrained or unrestrained, and I think that a candid conversation owing to the real significance -- the stakes are very high now, both for Saudi Arabia and for the United States. They're very high. They're higher than they've ever been, actually. And so candor in this case -- and I don't mistake what Michael Moore did for candor -- is essential.

I want to begin by saying that only a fool would deny the importance of strategic necessity in the formulation of foreign policy. This doesn't make you a realist, it makes you a rational individual. Only a fool would have denied the strategic necessity of the American policy during the Cold War and of the alliances that the United States formed during the Cold War, if you will, for pragmatic or practical or strategic reasons. But they were -- since self- defense and since security is itself a moral imperative and not merely a practical matter, it was not hard to understand why we found ourselves in alliances with governments, with regimes that were not, shall we say, to our liking -- or, alas, which became to our liking.

The Cold War is over, as is commonly known, and only a fool would deny the significance of strategic necessity in the world after September 11th. Again, the stakes have suddenly been raised dramatically -- virtually overnight, actually, in the fall of 2001 -- and there are reasons why the United States, even in its most justified moments of petulance or in its most petulant moments of irritation, cannot simply, let's say, unrestrainedly -- mistake unrestrained Saudi-bashing for a foreign policy.

There is the question of what we call regional stability, which is a euphemism that deserves to have some pressure put upon it to see exactly what we mean by regional stability and what we don't. And then there -- of course there is the danger of bin Ladenism, the danger of bin Ladenism mainly to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There is no doubt that if bin Laden or bin Ladenism were one day, God forbid, to take over the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it would be a world historical catastrophe; a catastrophe not just for the Saudis, but also for the United States and the region. And it would have an absolutely incendiary impact upon other regions of the world as well.

So as I say, it is a matter of elementary common sense for the United States to engage in serious cooperation with the Saudis in these matters.

But American foreign policy has not, and should not, and it actually never has been based entirely on strategic necessity. American values have also figured prominently in American foreign policy with American interests. And the prominence that Americans have frequently accorded American values in the articulation of their foreign policy is frequently a -- (audio break) --

(In progress following audio break) -- it is possible to pursue American values in an exceedingly foolish and irresponsible manner. And the debate about the wisdom of certain American policies in Iraq after the war is in part a debate about what is the relationship between values and interests in the formulation of American policy. But certainly, after September 11th it is, and rightly so, I believe, one of the pillars of American foreign policy to promote democratization around the world. And denuding this objective of all the lofty and somewhat insulated rhetoric of this administration, nonetheless, it seems incontrovertible to me that the more democracy spreads in the world, the securer the United States will be; the securer the United States will be. I think that the president has got it essentially right when he believes that freedom is not just a matter of American morality but also a matter of American security.

Now, when one gets to the question of democratization and the post-9/11 mood in the United States, one inevitably collides with this rude fact that the Saudi political system, the Saudi social system and the hegemony of religion over society in Saudi Arabia are things that are profoundly offensive to Americans and to Western liberals. I don't see any way around the fact that -- again, I'm not a scholar of Saudi Arabia. I read about the beginnings, the stirrings of transformations of various kinds in the kingdom. I have no way to know exactly how far or how serious these stirrings are, what motivates them, if they're motivated by a genuine understanding of the need for a long-term historical change or if they're motivated by short-term practical necessities and by, in fact, the thing that motivates most countries that have relationships with the United States, which is a desire to have peace with the United States, which frequently substitutes for long-range t!
hinking on the part of many foreign governments in their relations with the United States. Many governments abroad sometimes -- in their perfectly understandable desire to have a good relationship with the United States, sometimes shut down the kind of critical thinking that they need to be having about the future of their own society.

It is, in any event, impossible for me to see the Saudi society as anything but what we in the United States, what the traditions of Western liberalism would call a repressive society. Now, by this I do not mean any disrespect. I want to be clear about this. As I said, we all have our beliefs; we all have our beliefs. Before there was a Saudi-American relationship there was Saudi Arabia and there was the United States. They are independent, autonomous societies; independent, autonomous cultures with histories of their own, with identities of their own. They have their own understanding of -- you know, the people who live in these societies have their own understandings of the universe. And no disrespect is meant when one simply just announces that one doesn't understand or accept, shall we say, the view of the universe that another individual has. But it is important that these differences be aired very, very clearly.

Now, the reason I think it is important is this; when I hear my colleagues talk here about -- and I understand their language and their ideas completely -- about the importance of gradualism in the transformation of Saudi Arabia, about getting rid of talk about democracy and fearing the big "D" word; when I hear of Islam as a mobilizing discourse, I have to tell you that as a historian of religion and of the secularization of the West, certain thoughts immediately come to mind. The main one is this: The Western experience -- and I understand that Islamic societies may choose to conceive a different model of modernization and secularization. There is, in fact, an experiment going on in East Asia, which in some way may be viewed as an experiment in a different kind of model, in a non- Western model of political

liberalization. Or rather -- I mean, so if the East Asian model is an experiment in the possibility of economic liberalization that would not entail pol!
itical liberalization, it may be that there will emerge in Saudi Arabia an alternative non-Western model in political liberalization that will not entail religious liberalization. But I have to tell you that based on my own limited understanding of these terms, I have to warn you that such a thing is most likely not possible. As far as I can tell, it has never been possible for a society to modernize itself and to secularize itself without experiencing a rupture in itself, without a genuine experience of social and cultural pain.

Now the modernization and the secularization of the West was a process that took place over 300 years. It was not a pleasant process. Books were burned, people were burned, hundreds of thousands and eventually millions of innocent people were destroyed in the response to these processes. Westerners too often are very complacent about the liberties and the political ideologies that we have. They act as if the day after Thomas Aquinas died John Stuart Mill was born, and everything was fine thereafter. This is, to put it mildly, not how it happened. And the Western liberal way of life is now so firmly entrenched in the West that we in the West have actually forgotten its history and the very painful character of its origins.

But I warn you that when I hear phrases like Islamic liberalism or Islamic democracy, the adjective makes me nervous, because Islamic liberalism to me sounds like Islamic algebra or Islamic physics. There is no such thing. There is only physics. There is only algebra. There is only democracy.

Democracy is essentially based upon a universalistic analysis of the human person. Now it is possible for such a universalistic analysis to be a religious one also, since religious people believe that we are all created by God and that God, therefore, would have created in us also the desire to be free and also the minds which we deploy to bring about our freedom.

So again, I'm not -- the kind of secularization I'm talking about is not a kind of coarse, Voltaireian, anti-clerical modernization for which, by the way, the West paid very dearly later on too. There are more subtle and richer ways to go about this. But there is no way to go about, I really believe this, the reformation of a religious society that does not include reformation in the social and cultural sphere. That is to say, transformations in financial institutions, in managerial behavior, even in political institutions, unless they entail meeting the challenge, meeting the challenge of genuine religious reformation, will not bring about the kind of change that I think we are talking about.

Now I have understood for a very long time why it is that many members of the Saudi elite, and certainly many clerics, would be opposed to such a transformation -- many Christian clerics were opposed, many Jewish clerics were opposed. Again, when one looks at the Western model, the reaction to the first stirrings of modernization and secularization can be expected to be fierce, to be virulent, and the fiercest and most virulent example of this kind of recoil, this allergic recoil, is of course bin Laden himself, is of course bin Laden himself.

The irony is that bin Ladenism would not exist as a threat to Saudi Arabia, in my view, if there already had not occurred in Saudi Arabia some stirrings of change, some whiff of modernization, which is the thing that bin Laden fears more than anything, more than anything, because the bin Ladenist view, it seems to me, is the view that it is impossible for a religious society to modernize and even secularize and maintain its integrity and maintain its morality and maintain its fidelity to the traditions. This is not at all the case. This is not at all the case.

But what bin Laden -- and I should say one thing. And again, this is not a criticism of you, but one tires after a while of hearing that bin Laden would have agreed with this and bin Laden wouldn't have agreed with that. Karl Rove said that I had to vote for Bush because bin Laden wanted me to vote for Kerry, you know. Frankly, whether or not -- we have to consider the Saudi Arabian relationship, whether or not this creep wants us -- you know, whatever he thinks about the relationship, what matters to both countries is their own

careful and critical understanding of their own truest interests. And after a while it becomes a little useless and a little demogogic to warn people that this is what bin Laden wants. Bin Laden also wants the sun to rise tomorrow morning, as do I, and I do not want my desire to see the sun rise tomorrow to be confused as a fifth column for bin Ladenism.

In any case, my warning to you is just this: that every -- that if the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is indeed setting itself on the path to genuine transformation, which I think is the only condition for -- the only possible deep foundation, deep foundation for a continued Saudi- American relationship, then it is important to understand that what awaits the society of Saudi Arabia is a genuine rupture, is a genuine internal conflict. Intellectually, religiously, culturally, and within families themselves, and within the -- the problem with secularization is that is plays out in the kitchens of every family that experiences it, because children rebel against their parents; parents fail to understand their children; children leave, children leave the city or leave the country; children change the way they dress and change the way they eat. They may come back to the way they dressed, and they may come back to the way they eat. But this is the common currency of the secu!
larization of a religious society. And when -- so when one hears about Islamic liberalism, Islamic democracy, the big D-word, I just would end by saying that -- do not delude yourselves; it is a very noble path, the path of secularization, because it is the path towards genuine freedom, which, if you are a religious individual, as in fact I happen to be, you believe that freedom is in fact one of the things for which God equipped the human race. It's one of the ways, the significant ways, in which we differ from all the other creatures on the planet.

But if you have set yourself on this path, then I warn you this path, if you take it seriously, is going to be an exceedingly painful path that will require a great deal of courage and will inflict a great deal of pain upon your society.

Thank you.

MR. KAPLAN: Peter, since Leon was picking up where you left off, I wonder if you'd return the favor and really explain precisely why democratization and secularization should be something less than a strategic inoperative for the Saudis, or rather what the danger is of traveling too quickly to this goal, or at least more quickly than the advocates of gradualism, as you put it, would have it.

MR. MANDAVILLE: Well, first of all, I don't remember at any point in my remarks talking about secularization or anything like Islamic democracy or Islamic liberalism.

MR. : Right. Those are the terms that I --

MR. MANDAVILLE: These were not terms that I used in --

MR. : You used the big D-word.

MR. : The big D-word.

MR. MANDAVILLE: Big D -- the big T -- the big D thing I did use, and by the big D thing, I think I was aiming my remarks more at a version of American democratization abroad that suggests that there is this pre-packaged model that involves a whole set of assumptions about the relationship between the state and society, a set of assumptions about what sorts of processes and who is supposed to be involved in those to produce something, called "democracy," that developed fairly organically over several hundred years in Europe and eventually moved to the United States, perhaps improved upon, perhaps not, but gets packaged and said, "Right. This is what you need here." Plunk.

And in much of the nitty-gritty, on-the-ground programming of American democratization efforts, you tend to see versions of this playing out.

This, I think, is what I'm worried about. I wholly agree with Leon that to talk about Islamic liberalism and Islamic democracy -- this is not helpful. Either you mean the people are involved meaningfully in politics and deciding their political future, or they're not. We don't need to qualify it by calling it Islamic or otherwise.

Given that contemporary political thought is my main field of -- that I work in -- and I'm kind of tempted to push into this further, but that's not the topic of this seminar; we are talking quite specifically about Saudi Arabia.

So kind of as a final reply to what's been said here, and getting back to this issue of gradualism, what I guess I'm perhaps naively hoping for is that in a -- and let me resort once again to cliches here, I fear, but in a globalized world -- and I mean something by that more than simply the homogeneity in economic structures and assumptions; I mean more -- I'm talking more in terms of interconnectedness and processes of integration and fragmentation playing out simultaneously -- I'm wondering whether it might not be possible to experience versions of reformation, of transformation, that don't necessarily produce the same sort of rupture that occurred in Western Europe through the sort of 15th through 17th centuries, as wars of religion and such shook the civilizational foundations of Europe to the ground, going through that.

I guess what I'm wanting to ask is, perhaps we're on a course for rupture. And I would -- and you know, analytically, I'm perfectly willing to say that there's reason to believe that might be one scenario. But my sense is that you -- you don't say, "Well, it's going to be a rupture, let's just watch it happen." One says, "Okay, that's one scenario; is there a way to manage this so that either the rupture doesn't happen or so that we can live through the rupture and something good can come out of it?"

MR. LIPPMAN: Can I just say a few?

MR. KAPLAN: Sure.

MR. LIPPMAN: I just want to -- I mean, I certainly accept a lot of what you're saying and the spirit in which you're saying it. I would just say this, that the debate about democratization is a real one and a necessary one, but the debate about democratization should be a debate about means and not about ends. In other words, it is not at all clear what the best way to democratize or -- I don't want to say to democratize a society -- for a society to democratize itself, because finally you cannot -- I mean, you can be a goad and a provocation and you can bring things that a society might need, but if the society doesn't internalize it, then it won't happen.

So you know, and in that sense, whatever the role of the United States is in its objective of democratization, it will be an auxiliary role or an ancillary role. We cannot do the work of another society for itself, and in fact every society has the right, if you will, the God-given right, to fight it out among itself. We had a Civil War that was essentially the delayed war of our Constitution. We waited 75 years to massacre each other to figure out how exactly who we were. Other societies have gone through similar convulsions.

Now -- but the -- the -- so we can have a debate about the political means, and this is a debate that, you know -- and in fact, since -- actually, since the Reagan administration there has been a great deal of practical experience on the ground in democratization, some of which is being brilliantly ignored by the Bush administration in Iraq. And we can argue about whether it's -- is it fair elections, is it political parties, is it a free press, is it certain basic social laws, is it an independent judiciary, what is the role of the military in society have to be. There are infinite number of variables here. But the one thing -- and this can be

managed, I guess, because I agree that it is not in the interests of a society to break itself into little pieces. Nothing good can come out of that in the short term.

This, by the way, happened in Europe. You know, it is impossible to regard the European phenomena of fascism, and indeed of communism, except as reactions to what I think was the noble and courageous and inevitable European path towards a liberal order. By liberal I mean small L, not --

But the one thing that cannot be managed, and I think about which there cannot even be any serious debate if one is serious about reform, is not the realm of the political, but the realm of the philosophical. In other words, one has to simply have made a philosophical choice, which is actually based upon one's view of the human being, of the human individual; I mean, how one regards the human individual.

Now theocratic societies, certain forms of theology -- most forms of theology, not certain forms of theology -- in all the monotheisms -- in all the monotheisms -- have a view of the individual that simply did not prove conducive to what we regard as democratic and liberal life, which is one of the reasons why there was what we would doing in the West between, let's say -- in the 17th, 18th and 19th century, they fought what they would call on CNN a culture war, right? That was the mother of all culture wars.

But the culture war happened because there turned out to be no -- whereas there may have been political compromise, there turned out to be no philosophical compromise at some point. There turned out to be no "one either believes this or one believes that." And that moment of truth, I think -- the longer that moment of truth is deferred -- both at the highest levels of government but also, as I say, at the levels of individuals -- the longer that moment is deferred, the more fragile the Saudi-American relationship will be -- which will be the least of Saudi Arabia's concerns, actually, given the path that it seems to have chosen -- and the more -- the more misunderstanding there will be and et cetera, et cetera.

MR. KAPLAN: Thomas, now that we're talking about means and specifically democratization, and given that the Bush team has enshrined democracy promotion in official policy, in word if not deed, is there any evidence that as things stand now that in bilater!
al negotiations or meetings at the U.S. embassy in Saudi Arabia, putting aside the Religious Freedom Act, that the question of democratization actually plays any role whatsoever in U.S.-Saudi relations today?

MR. LIPPMAN: Well, I hope not because were it to do so -- except in the general philosophical sense. I mean the Saudis know perfectly well what Americans think about how society should be structured.

Except in the general philosophical sense, the Saudis are not amenable to input from us on this topic. And perhaps they should be, but they're not. And especially in the current sort of overheated environment of anti-American sentiment in the society, I think there's a different way to look at it.

The internal sort of philosophical cultural debate that Leon talked about has, in fact, begun in earnest in Saudi Arabia not because we wish it to, but because it's human nature. And I think it's -- to me, it's important to understand. Here's the way I look at this. We tend to assume that as human societies anywhere -- you could talk about the Yanomamis of South America -- that as human societies modernize in a technical and material sense, they will distance themselves willy-nilly from the tribal or village or cultural or religious or whatever you want to call it -- pagan -- traditions with which they grew up.

I don't believe in Saudi Arabia that that's necessarily true. My sense is that, in the face of the most overwhelming, breathtaking physical transformation that any human society has gone through in such a compressed time, a lot of people in Saudi Arabia, even the most outward-looking in the social sense, tend to re-embrace Islam as a sort of social, cultural and even, you might say, political anchor against which they want to defend who they are and how they think about life and society.

Now, we would prefer -- I certainly would prefer that this internal debate in Saudi Arabia be expanded and include people who've read Rousseau and studied the Federalist Papers, which they don't do in Saudi Arabia. But nevertheless, not just from the top down but from the bottom up, the process of reexamining the relationship of people to their own society and of people to the external world is underway in Saudi Arabia, and it's not necessarily all coming from the top down. Some of it is motivated by economics. Ghazi al-Ghossaibi's labor reforms are motivated by economics. But the sudden willingness of the people of Saudi Arabia to debate in public and in the press the issue of spousal abuse is not dictated by economics, it's dictated by the fact their society is evolving. We just don't know where it's going to evolve to.

MR. KAPLAN: Jim, would you like to jump in on that?

MR. PLACKE: Yes. My contacts with Saudi Arabia go back about 35 years. And I -- as you referred to in the introduction -- spent some time there in the American embassy in the period that we've decided was the peak of the U.S.-Saudi relationship in the early 1980s -- not because I was there, but because of all the factors that we've described.

Very shortly, within -- actually, the day that the armistice -- and it is an armistice -- was signed by the U.S.-led coalition and Saddam Hussein's military leadership at the end of the first Gulf War in 1991, I arrived in Jeddah, and got off the plane and had a most astonishing experience. I had never, ever in the course of the three years I was there as a representative of the United States, had a serious political discussion about Saudi politics with Saudis. But from the time I got off the plane until I left, I didn't have anything else. That's all the Saudis wanted to talk about was political change.

There were then, in subsequent months, rival manifestos from, if you wish, the conservatives and the liberals presented to the public and to the royal family. What was interesting to me about them was that they started from a common point: rule of law, independent judiciary, transparency in government -- in other words, constraint on unrestrained royal privilege. They then departed and went in very different directions and would lead, in due course, to very different results.

A lot of this then was submerged again for a time. But in my sense -- I share, I think, what Tom has described -- it's definitely resurfacing, and there is a mood of change, there is a mood of -- if not democratization, at least participation in government.

Taxes have been mentioned. This is a subject that's come up before the Majlis Ash Shura, the consultative assembly. And in my understanding from talking to some of the members of the Majlis, their position, the Majlis' position, is it will endorse a taxation system that would affect Saudis in ways that they have not been affected before, but they want a voice in how the money is spent; they want to know where it's going. And without that, which so far the government has not been prepared to concede, there won't be taxes. And that's part of -- it's just another element of a really fundamental and very widespread debate. I don't know where it's going to go either, but the process is well underway.

MR. LIPPMAN: Chas Freeman describes the current system as "representation without taxation."

MR. : We have that in the District.

MR. KAPLAN: (Off mike) -- the kingdom of the District of Columbia. Leon, just one final question is that when Thomas was saying that he really hopes that America has no role or, at most, a minimal role in the democratic conversation in Saudi Arabia, you were nodding your head vigorously in assent, and I wonder why. Do you think there is really no role for America to play in furthering this dialogue? Where do you fall on that question?

MR. WIESELTIER: Oh, I think that, as I said before, that democracy, if it's real, is indigenously developed or it just doesn't really exist for very long.

Of course I think the United States should have a role. And I actually have, you know, sort of limited patience when I hear -- not today, but when I read about resentment that Saudis feel about American views about Saudi Arabia. You know, Saudis also have very, shall we say, flamboyant views and recommendations for other societies as well. We all have our views of other societies. I think that it is historically the role of the United States, it should be an objective of America foreign policy to encourage, respectfully, but firmly, the democratizers, if you will, or stirrings of pluralism or openness in closed societies that are vital to our interests. You know, it may be if -- even if it is the case, and I'm sure it is, actually, because I don't follow this, that American dependence on Saudi oil has diminished significantly and is diminishing so that that practical reason for the relationship may loom less large in the future. Given where Saudi Arabia exists!
, given the region it's in, given the history of our relationship, and so on, of course the United States should do what it can. But I think that democracy cannot be imposed in the way that peace cannot be imposed from -- externally, externally. And so, you know -- and in that sense, I think that there is -- I guess that would be my compunction about, shall we call it the "Wolfowitzian" construction of democratization.

I mean, I do think that if democracy comes to Iraq, it will be in part because the American overthrow of Saddam Hussein hastened, accelerated the process. I also accelerated the opposite process, because it is important to remember that democratization, insofar as it involves the overthrow of one political culture and the establishment of another political culture, is essentially a policy of destabilization -- essentially, in its core, a policy of destabilization. And destabilization should largely be the work of the people who live in the society that is being destabilized, because they are the people who will live in the consequences of that.

So, yeah, I mean, I do believe that there are more intelligence and less intelligent, more activist and less activist ways to bring about -- to encourage democratization. And whereas I'm not -- you know, I do -- and I'm not embarrassed by the American interest in encouraging democratization in Saudi Arabia. I think it is an objective that will only be good for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia -- or if not for the kingdom, for the people of Saudi Arabia and for the United States as well. I'd just add one other thing. An important point was made here earlier, which I think is worth stressing, and that is, it's important to remember the extent to which technology is not necessarily an agent of democratization, that technology -- one of the things we've learned in fact from Saudi Arabia and other societies is that technology is essentially value neutral, and that, you know, PCs don't come with -- you know, Jefferson and Locke are not part of the software that comes in th!
e PC in the way the Jefferson and Locke didn't come with the batteries in the tape recorders -- the tape cassettes that Khomeini made in 1979 and so on.

Technology is value-neutral. It can be used in the service of any ideology -- a secular ideology; a religious ideology.

And indeed, there was this view after the fall of the Soviet empire in eastern Europe that was this view that Albert Wohlstetter made famous, the view that the facts will set you free, that basically -- and there were -- people went around believing that in fact certain technologies of communications made it impossible for democratization not to happen. One heard charming, or maybe not charming stories from people who visited the Soviet Union in the '50s that there were no central switchboards at the Soviet Union because the Soviets hadn't yet figured out the technology for bugging a switchboard where they new how to bug individual telephones so every room in every Soviet hotel for a while had its own phone number.

But we now have counterexamples. I mean, people who've studied the development of the Internet, of computers in China, for example, have discovered that the Chinese have discovered ways to actually use Internet technology for repressive aims.

So as I say, I think that technology, speaking in terms of democratization, is a wash. And once again, like all of the other important questions in human life, it comes down to philosophical decisions that people make within their culture. I mean a really do believe the finally, it will be philosophical and cultural that will make the difference.

MR. KAPLAN: On that note, I'd like to open up the panel to audience questioners. If questioners could just indemnify themselves, their affiliation, and any panelists they'd like to answer their question.

Questions? Ma'am?

Q (Off mike.)

MR. KAPLAN: I'm sorry.

(Off mike cross talk.)

MR. KAPLAN: Is there a mike. If she'd like to, but --

STAFF: We're taping this.

MR. KAPLAN: Oh, yeah. I'm sorry, would you mind coming up to the mike?

Q (Inaudible.) I was -- first of all, I was really interested by what you said at the end, because I think that's what's happening in Saudi Arabia and most of the Arab countries: development, change, but based -- you know, economical reform, but still the political situation, it's the same. There's no social change, no political change, so it won't help because the economic liberation is linked to the political situation also in my point of view.

Second, I had this impression from most of what was said that it's a very positive view about Saudi Arabia, as if it's a beautiful place to go and if someone over here hasn't been there would be -- you know, would have a really much more expectation about that country. I think we have to admit that we are still talking about systems that are moving from worse to bad and then to reach the acceptable level, not only in Saudi Arabia but in other countries. I would like to point -- what about human rights to women's status, religion freedom -- which is a fact -- Islamic extremism? If anyone is answer, just what about these issues?

And what about -- we are talking -- you mentioned that, well, don't talk about democracy because change, you know, it has to go step by step, it needs time. And there's a lot of talk in Saudi about change, but what about action? And let's say, well, will it take like 50, 100, 200 more years before even talking about democracy?

That's it. Thank you.

MR. MANDAVILLE: Great. Well, first of all, Saudi Arabia is a very beautiful place to visit if you haven't actually seen it.

Q Not how beautiful. I didn't mean -- no --

MR. MANDAVILLE: No, I understand.

Q It could be a beautiful country, but --

MR. MANDAVILLE: I understand exactly what you're saying and I agree with you completely that human rights, women's rights, Islamic extremism, these are all problems. I certainly, at least --

Q Are they major problems?

MR. MANDAVILLE: I thought that I had said that I definitely see that there are major social tensions in this country right now, political tensions that have the risk of shaking this country to its very foundations. What's not clear to me is what the foundations of that country are, and I think that's what's in the process of being negotiated right now.

When I -- and let me just clarify. When I express skepticism about democracy, I don't want to be heard to be saying, "Oh, everyone talks about democracy; just let things go on the way they were, everything's fine, this is a perfect country, just let things work themselves out." What I'm concerned about is an approach to democratization -- and this is why I used the big-D term -- that assumes that there is a single necessary trajectory to that process, that there is one correct model of democracy that Saudi Arabia must achieve, must be brought to.

I want to see democratization in Saudi Arabia. I think that this does have to be a slower process and it has to be one that Saudis negotiate on their own terms over time. If it happens quickly and if it happens due to external political pressure to have it happen in a certain way, then I think you run the risk of actually bringing about the nightmare scenario that so many of us see as a possibility. I think you actually heighten the potential for that to happen.

So does that mean that for the foreseeable future that there are going to continue to be serious problems in Saudi Arabia? Yes. Will women continue to be discriminated against? Yes. Will religious minorities continue to be discriminated against? Yes. But you don't flip a switch to change that. God knows that those things didn't change in the West by flipping a switch; they happened in a very ugly set of turmoils that took place over several hundred years.

Do I think it's going to take several hundred years in Saudi Arabia? No. Everything's sped up. We expect so much so quickly these days, and we should. But I don't think we're looking at 200 years for this to happen. I think we're looking at a very next messy generation ahead, and the question is, can this generation work?

I think that Leon's right; it is about fundamental philosophical choices. So the question is, is there emerging in Saudi Arabia a vanguard generation, a critical mass of people located at the correct places in society to say: this is the nature of the relationship between the individual, his or her religion, and society, and I've made these choices and I'm willing to institutionalize them, I'm willing to put them into education -- educational curricula? Is that happening? Yes. And I think, as Tom has pointed out, those conversations are starting to happen.

Islamism -- Islamic extremism in Saudi Arabia is not one thing. You can identify at least four major factions and orientations towards Islamic extremism or politicized Islam in Saudi Arabia, and they don't all agree with each other. They're fighting it out amongst themselves. The secular liberals are fighting things out amongst theirselves.

So yes, these processes are beginning. These conversations are taking place. They're not going to happen quickly enough for the taste of some people, but my fear is that if we force them, ask them to happen too quickly, we actually run the risk of producing the scenario we're trying to avoid.

MR. WIESELTIER: Can I ask a question about the nightmare scenario? Because I mean, this is a -- first of all, one has to define what one means by the nightmare scenario, and presumably one doesn't just mean

the fall of a particular government or a particular ruling elite, because that might count as progress, in many ways. One has a law -- but let's think -- since Rousseau was mentioned here earlier, let's entertain a counterfactual.

What if one was told in the early 19th century, if one was caught reading Rousseau, and someone with a -- very prophetic -- came along and said, "Be careful about Rousseau and be careful about going down that path, because it won't be long before Hitler will arise as a response to that."

MR. : Right.

MR. WIESELTIER: Right? Now what would have been the proper answer to such an individual? The answer would obviously not have been to put down Rousseau.

MR. : Right.

MR. WIESELTIER: Right? That we can all agree. But it might even have -- the proper answer might even have been that if in fact the attempt to bring about what we now call a regime of human rights, of religious freedom, of press freedom, of freedom for women, of civil marriage, of an independent judiciary, of a constitutional -- that if the attempt to bring all this about is inevitably, in fact, going to engender the ugliest form of reaction -- which it will, because it always has -- then that may also be an argument, in effect, for moving as quickly and as strongly and as firmly and as bravely as possible, so as to provide us with a standpoint from which to resist the inevitable reaction.

The reaction will come. I mean, there's no way that will -- and as I say, bin Laden is himself part of -- a part of the nightmare scenario. And in that sense, even the little bit that you've talked about already has provoked this monster into existence.

So I wonder if in fact it's -- you know, I wonder if -- we shouldn't allow the concern about the nightmare scenario to play into the hands of people whose short-term fundamental interests and certainly their philosophical interests is not in transformation, and we shouldn't allow our worry about the nightmare scenario to become an alibi for a kind of complacence about progress, which it could be. I'm not saying in your case, but it could be.

MR. LIPPMAN: Can I add something to that?

Look for a long time, Americans who were involved with Saudi Arabia acquiesced in -- MR. WIESELTIER: Oh, sure.

MR. LIPPMAN: -- some of the most odious --

MR. WIESELTIER: Oh, yes.

MR. LIPPMAN: -- what regard as the most odious aspects of Saudi Arabian society.

MR. WIESELTIER: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MR. LIPPMAN: The United States government, for example, excluded Jews from military and diplomatic deployments to Saudi Arabia for a long time.

MR. WIESELTIER: Absolutely.

MR. LIPPMAN: And I think that the historical record shows that of all U.S. presidents since FDR, only Kennedy put any serious pressure on the Saudis to do something about what he regarded as the odious internal systems in Saudi Arabia.

But the experience of this past spring was instructive, in response to your question. There was a -- what you might call Taliban-style extremist insurgency that was blowing people up. And since the death of Abdulaziz al-Muqrin in the shoot-out in -- what was it? May or June? -- that insurgency has receded to the point where it's now, as John Kerry famously said, a nuisance, not a threat.

But why did that happen? Why were the Saudi security forces able to snuff that resistance out in such relatively short order and with such relatively little damage? It's because the extreme, violent resisters, the extreme, violent insurgents never got any political or social traction with the Saudi people. The sea in which Mao said those people should swim dried up on them because the Saudis don't want, in my opinion -- and I don't like to talk about an entire -- you know, ascribe characteristics to an entire group of people -- but they don't wish to live under a(n) anti-technological, anti-social, anti- democratic Taliban-style regime.

At the same time, the people who run Saudi Arabia have a country to run, and they recognize that some of the very things that we're talking about, some of the things that we would most like to see happen in the shortest order, run the risk of provoking the kind of -- the very kind of violent backlash that we saw in the spring. And preservation is the first law of the House of Saud. I mean --

MR. WIESELTIER: But there are definitions of preservation. In other words, the House of Saud has a definition of preservation that may include forbidding women to drive cars, and we can say, well, there may be other definitions of the preservation of the House of Saud that are possible. MR. LIPPMAN: Yes, and that's -- I think we wouldn't disagree --

MR. WIESELTIER: Yeah, I understand.

MR. LIPPMAN: -- that these are worthwhile conversations to have, and they're being had in Saudi Arabia, both in structured forms and unstructured forms.

MR. KAPLAN: Further questions? Gentleman in the back.

Q (Off mike.)

MR. KAPLAN: Please. Thank you.

MR. : This gentleman is an agent provocateur. (Laughter.)

Q Hi, I'm Steve Buck. I was desk officer for Saudi Arabia in the '70s and consul general, '96 to '99.

My question: You've talked about a world historical disaster if bin Ladenism took over. There's also been discussion of managing the relationship. I apologize because, Tom, you may have talked about this before I got here. But my concern is Iraq and how that affects us, because if you have Saudis looking at pictures of Abu Ghraib, or what I saw in The Washington Post of American soldiers with their boots on walking on rugs in mosques and then executing a wounded Iraqi, that greatly complicates the ability of American diplomats to function. And when I hear all this discussion of democracy, it seems to me profoundly theoretical if you're actually dealing on the ground, because you -- on the ground you have to have credibility. How can we have credibility when our public opinion polls in Saudi Arabia are at an all-time low? So this discussion is about Saudi Arabia.

My question is, what about our part in undermining the very kinds of things we're trying to accomplish? Thank you.

MR. KAPLAN: If I could just actually broaden that question out a bit. Leaving aside the fact that the Marines may not have time to take off their boots in the heat of combat, the question of Iraq -- exactly, A -- I think I'm more interested in the affect that Iraq is having on Saudi Arabia than any role Saudi Arabia is playing in Iraq in putting Iraq back together again or assisting, if at all, the American effort.

When we read the papers today, the only time you see the words Saudi mentioned in an article about Iraq is if there is a dead Saudi or two in the rubble of Fallujah. Are the Saudis playing a quiet role? Are they playing an open role? And conversely, as the questioner asked, is -- I mean, I was in -- I was not in Saudi Arabia but, unfortunately, I was in Iraq this past summer, and on the way there I spent a week in Kuwait. And the Kuwaitis seemed, or at least the Kuwaitis I spoke with seemed extremely supportive of what we were doing in Iraq. Just what the general mood is among the Saudi government.

MR. PLACKE: Well, let me take a shot at that. I think the Saudi government was quite clear in advance of -- well, during the U.S. preparations for the invasion, that they thought this was a distinctly bad idea and that there were better ways to handle the situation. But that's all history.

We did launch and we overthrew Saddam Hussein, and ultimately, Saudi Arabia provided the at least minimal -- and I would say more than minimal -- degree of support for military operations that we needed to do the job quickly and effectively. Since that time, I think Saudi Arabia has -- it's a very interested bystander, but it doesn't really see that it has a role to play right now.

And indeed, there are consequences for Saudi Arabia. The arms flows are not -- across the Saudi-Iraqi border are not from the south to the north; they're from the north to the south. And that's part of the problem. And I wouldn't be quite so sanguine as perhaps others that the extreme Islamist movement in Saudi Arabia has been quelled and that Saudi Arabia security forces were able to do this almost in record time. I would like to think that that was the case, but I'm doubtful. I think Saudi Arabia is simply going to wait to see how Iraq pans out. I think there -- if the White House view prevails and we have a genuine democracy in Iraq, that will have some political resonance in Saudi Arabia as well. I think that is a -- it's one of the possible outcomes; I'm reluctant to think that it's the most likely. However it turns out, and if it simply degenerates into internal turmoil -- (audio break; tape change) -- the process is underway in Saudi Arabia that hopef!
ully will lead to an ultimately democratic and liberalized society. There's not much that we can do to encourage that. There are things that we can do to perhaps raise the level of tension. So in that sense, I don't really see Iraq as being terrible critical to this.

Could I add one footnote, because the word oil came up earlier, which of course is an area that I have a particular interest in. The U.S. reliance on Saudi oil, about what we heard some during the recent political campaign, is really beside the point. It really doesn't matter where a given barrel of oil comes from -- whether it comes into the U.S. from Canada, which is now our largest supplier, or from Saudi Arabia, or from Mexico or Nigeria or wherever. What's important is that it's available. And Saudi Arabia has a quarter of the world's oil reserves. They produce over 10 percent of world oil supply. There is no way to substitute for the loss of Saudi Arabia in the global oil market. And it doesn't really matter whether we buy or somebody else buys it, as long as it's there to be bought. If things should disrupt -- become so disruptive in Saudi Arabia that Saudi Arabia is greatly reduced in its ability to supply oil to the world oil market, there will cert!
ainly be an impact. I don't think that's really key to trying to understand the processes at work there, or it will have very much influence on them. It's just an observations.

MR. LIPPMAN: The country that's the most active in Iraq is not Saudi Arabia but Iran. And almost any foreseeable outcome in Iraq, that country that's most strengthened by what the U.S. has done there is Iran.

That's the great irony of what Bush did, taking down one point of the axis of evil was to greatly strengthen another one.

The combination of a regionally ascendent Iran and politically ascendent Shi'ites in Iraq holds great potential for some kind of reevaluation of the situation in Saudi Arabia, because of the Saudi's only Shi'ite minority, and what the -- I'd like to hear from Peter on that.

MR. KAPLAN: Peter.

MR. MANDAVILLE: Yeah, I think that's a very important issue. Just briefly on the Iraq thing, I think it's politically impossible for Saudi Arabia to be openly engaged there. My sense is that what happened is that Saudi Arabia said, quietly, okay, we'll give you the logistical support and perhaps something more substantial than that that you need to execute this military operational. After that, we're going to pretend as if nothing is going on up there, because if our population is put in a place where it can see use as colluding in the American occupation of another Arab country, that is going to exacerbate the tensions that are lying just below the surface and are really there. I agree. The extremist elements in Saudi Arabia have not been, in a comprehensive sense, quelled. There have been isolated operations that have managed to defuse particular situations. But it's all lurking right under there. The Shi'a issue is, I think, going to be increasingly impor!
tant in the sort of immediate Gulf triangle right there: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq. There is a substantial Shi'a population in Saudi Arabia, and it is located predominantly in the eastern province and more specifically, right around the more sensitive locations in terms of the country's oil infrastructure.

This also, in a sense, beckons back towards a time, you know, through the 1980's where there was this real "holier than thou" tug of war going on between Saudi Arabia and Iran for the kind of hearts and minds of the Muslim world and the Arab world. And I think that Iran is placed in a position right now to significantly increase it's political capital within not only the Muslim world, but the developing world, more general.

There was a response to the Islamic revolution in '79 that reverberated well beyond simply the Middle East. But this became a rallying cry for a number of countries who really enjoyed seeing a country such as Iran stand up to the United States in their view. There's a sense in which, around this issue of the Shi'a populations in these three country, we may have a replay of that whole set of moves moving forward.

MR. KAPLAN: Final question from the audience? Ma'am?

Q Hi. My name is April Shuit (sp), and I'm a returned Peace Corps volunteer. I served in Jordan, and I've also traveled throughout the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia.

And my question is a comment and a question building on what the last gentlemen asked. It seems a bit duplicitous to me that we talk about what effect will the war in Iraq have on Saudi Arabia and, indeed, other Arab countries, and then our response is to only talk about how it will affect the governments of those countries. So the reply was, I don't think the Saudis can do anything about that. But yet, we're sitting here talking about democracy and the need to engage just the average person in their governments. And I guess my question is, what will the United States do, or what should we do to engage the public and be concerned with their hearts and minds, and understand that the average citizen is not watching what's going on and thinking in political terms, "Oh, we can't do anything about this." They're just like me and you. If we watched something like that on our televisions happening to our citizens, we would be enraged.

And if we want to talk about true democratic reform and helping these societies achieve it, we need to care about not only what their governments will do, but what the people will do and what they want and how they will respond to that when the day comes that they do have a voice in their societies.

MR. KAPLAN: So your question -- just to reframe it briefly.

Q The question is what can the United States do, or what should we be doing to have a more sensitive approach to how our policies are affecting the average person? I think everything -- all of the responses have been framed in the context of how it affects the government and what their role is, you know, after -- or what their role is in society and how they are perceived by their people. But no one has addressed the real feelings of average citizens when they see these injustices taking place. And, you know, the gentleman mentioned the shooting in the mosque, or -- you know, and just the war itself, and what the Saudi government reaction is and how maybe their hands are tied, they don't see a role for them right now. But how the average Saudi citizen feels, or how any Arab citizen feels about what's going on, and how they feel that U.S. policies towards them are callous and don't consider how they feel as people. But then we talk about, you know, bringing !
democracy to their societies, but we're not listening to them, we're not responding to their reactions to what's happening, it's only in the context of government relations.

MR. KAPLAN: I guess this is a bit of a -- or it certainly touches on the arena of public diplomacy and our manifest failures to have anything resembling an effective public diplomacy program.

I don't know if anyone would like to tackle that?

MR. MANDAVILLE: I would, I would actually love to.

MR. KAPLAN: Sure, have at it.

MR. MANDAVILLE: Your question gets to the heart of the fact that there is no sense in which the United States is going to in a credible way be able to talk about values, such as democracy, open societies and liberalism, without a fundamental change in the tenor of its conduct in and towards the Middle East.

Now, my colleagues in Middle East studies feel that they've been pointing this out for decades and decades and the message just doesn't seem to get through in Washington. You can't go around talking about freedom, liberty, openness, democracy, and simultaneously pursue foreign policies in these countries that run right up against the grain; that do the exact opposite of espousing the sorts of values -- or furthering the values that you are seeking for these populations to espouse.

Public diplomacy -- and there's been so much talk about this; what should be the strategy towards the Muslim world, towards the Middle East? Well, we'll bring in an ad executive first, maybe that will work. No, that didn't work. Okay, let's try a broad-based, comprehensive set of initiatives.

Public diplomacy, in my view, right now is being used too often as an excuse to not actually, fundamentally deal with the problems of foreign policies themselves.

And I think you're absolutely right, if you want there to be a meaningful embrace of the values of openness, liberty and democracy, the example that the United State sets in its foreign policy in the Arab world has been absolutely abysmal. There is a, I think dangerous nostalgia in the American imagination of its foreign policy historically. The people upon whom these things are visited do not forget nearly as quickly as the Americans, who, as you say quite rightly, watch their television screens and wonder, "What does this have to do with me?" But in a democratic country, they are, in a sense, complicit in those things happening, and there's a fundamental problem here.

MR. KAPLAN: Leon, do you have anything real quick?

MR. WIESELTIER: Well, I think it's a complicated situation. I mean, I think that, you know -- I think that there were terrible abuses committed in the American war in Iraq if that's what we're talking about. I don't think that those abuses should emerge as the definitive symbol of the entirety of the American enterprise in Iraq. I think that there were much better things that happened than Abu Ghraib, and in some ways much worse things as well.

If you mean -- if one talks about the extent to which the American gospel of freedom in the Middle East is hypocritical because of previous American behavior, I think that's incontrovertible. But I would have to include the intimacy of the American relationship with the House of Saud as one of the -- one of the American foreign policies that would not bring heart to democratizers and dissidents in the Arab world. You know, it's the same as would be true of the American relationship with an autocratic immobilist regime like Mubarak's, for example.

Now -- and I assume that one of the things you're talking about that we haven't talked about here this morning, which has made it an especially pleasant morning, is the American policy to Israel, which is a very large subject which I don't want to go into at this moment.

You know, wherever there are lofty ideals, there are going to be -- there are going to be great hypocrisy. Anyone who's lived in a religious society knows this, by the way. And I think that there is -- that people who use -- it all depends on how one invokes the American record as a criticism of the American objective of democratization. If one invokes it as a way of delegitimating the objective of democratization, I think that one is actually making a debater's point that is just useless and even harmful to the societies about which we all are concerned.

MR. : (Off mike.)

MR. WIESELTIER: Right. Oh, I understand that.

If one invokes the -- so, for example, people went on, in the run up to the war in Iraq -- and whatever one thinks about the war in Iraq, let's assume for the sake of argument that -- you know, look, let's assume that Wolfowitz is at least sincere about democratization. That may be the problem if you're opposed to the war in Iraq, but he's at least sincere about it. People are talking about, well, you know, Rumsfeld himself went and met with Saddam. Well, yes, he did, but that's not particularly helpful where we are right now.

So I think that there has been enormous American hypocrisy in this matter, but the future of the welfare, the justice in these societies depends not just upon the recognition of American hypocrisy, but upon a critical assessment of the ideal of liberalization. And that, for me, is -- that's the bottom line. That's the bottom line.

MR. LIPPMAN: I would just add one point. In all this conversation about U.S. policy, it's really essential to distinguish between the reasons for anti-American sentiment and the reasons for terrorism. They're not the same at all. Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Muslim world are full of people who are deeply, deeply and sort of terminally resentful of American policy on whatever front -- Israel, Iraq, whatever -- just as there were people who never forgave us for reinstalling the Shah on the throne in 1953, all right? But they don't come over here and blow up buildings. And the whole pathology of terrorism is a separate issue that we haven't talked about here.

You know, in my view, we can't fall into the trap, even however critical we may be of what we've done in certain places, of saying that we brought this on ourselves or allowing any kind of rationalization for terrorism. There's no people on Earth to whom Americans did more harm, on whom we inflicted more pain over a longer period of time than the Vietnamese, and you don't see any Vietnamese coming over here,

blowing up our buildings. There's a pathology of terrorism out there in certain parts of the world that needs to be dealt with as a separate phenomenon in my opinion.

Q May I say something on that?

MR. KAPLAN: Very briefly.

Q Very briefly. I wasn't implying that it's an excuse for terrorism, but I think that if we are going to have a public discourse about how to engage the Middle East in a constructive way, in a way that benefits all of our societies, we need to be able to do it without referring to terrorism -- you know, we can't excuse -- we can't not have the conversation because it's excusing the terrorism. No one was implying that. But everything single time the issues come up, terrorism gets mentioned, there's always this implication that you can't have those debates and those discussions without, you know, (talking with ?) terrorists in the Middle East.

MR. KAPLAN: A fair point.

Q I have a quick --

MR. KAPLAN: I'm afraid we're out of time, but we can talk afterwards.

Just to summarize briefly, I think we have some kind of agreement that there is some kind of process, however nebulous it may be, some kind of transformation occurring in Saudi Arabia; that moreover, that transformation is occurring rather gradually but that it need occur; and finally, that America's role in this process, like it or not, will be a minimal one. And on that note, I'd like to thank all of our panelists and our audience for coming today. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

END.