



'US Foreign Policy after the Mid-Terms: New Direction or more of the same?'

**Transcript of Sir Christopher Meyer's remarks
Global Strategy Forum Lunchtime Lecture,
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[Thank you very much. I got back from the United States late last night and I can give you a very short talk on the question posed in the publicity blurb about what the impact of the mid-term elections is likely to be on American foreign policy, which goes as follows: '*God knows*'! Or I can give you a slightly longer talk and I suppose what I really ought to do is give you the slightly longer version!]

First of all, having spoken to a lot of people last week in Washington DC, both on the Republican and the Democratic side and having found myself in the White House at virtually the same time at the Prime Minister (I was a long, long way away from him and he was a long, long way away from me – but I did feel I was touched by greatness, as it were!), the first thing I wanted to bring to you was my reading of the sweepstakes, if you like, for the 2008 Presidential election, as one gleaned it from talking to people. There really is a lot of confusion here. It is a very, very fluid picture. If I were Ambassador now in Washington and if I were projecting out from the political situation after the mid-terms through to 2008, I would find it extremely difficult to make any confident prediction about who the two candidates, running head-to-head from September 2008, were going to be.

On the Republican side, among the Republican hierarchy, the inner bowels, if you like, of the Republican party, it has been a huge blow to them that George Allen, one of the senators from Virginia, has imploded and imploded horribly in a scandal, among other things, about his making some very racially inappropriate remarks on at least a couple of occasions, because I think the Republican hierarchy looked at George Allen and thought to themselves: '*This is precisely the kind of Republican candidate, who leans pretty heavily to the right, but who is capable also of taking the centre ground*', much in the way that George W. did back in 2000. With George Allen removed from the scene, you have got a set of candidates remaining (of course, not everyone has declared and even the ones I am going to refer to have not, all of them, formally declared), who do not actually cover *yet*, the Republican spectrum, and if this continues, I think it will produce a structural weakness in the Republican candidacy in 2008

The frontrunner is, of course, still Senator John McCain, with whom I was able to have a few words while I was there. He is, as you know, regarded with very great suspicion among many parts of the Republican party, because of his maverick record. He gave George W. Bush a near-death experience in New Hampshire in early 2000, if I remember rightly, and has tended to run against the party mainstream. Well, McCain is making big efforts now to reposition himself and get more to the centre of the Republican party, but he has not yet succeeded in overcoming the visceral suspicion of him among many Republican voters. I personally think, and I had these thoughts reinforced by a number of people I spoke to, that he will not actually survive to be the Republican candidate in 2008, both for the reasons I have just cited and because I think there is another reason. I am a great admirer of his, I think he is a great man and I think he brings a lot to American politics and he was certainly very helpful to a new



British Ambassador who was trying to find his way around in the Senate, but I am not sure that, actually, he has the temperament to get through a gruelling campaign that will be gruelling whoever he is running against. He also, at the moment, espouses a position on Iraq which calls for the significant and early reinforcements of American troops in Iraq and that runs so counter to the majority view of what the United States should be doing in Iraq and the majority view in the United Kingdom of what Britain should be doing, that it is hard to see how he is going to be able to reconcile that and sustain that position in a campaign where the tide is running in completely the opposite direction.

You then have Mayor Giuliani – we call him Mayor Giuliani even though Rudolph Giuliani has not been Mayor now for a long time. He runs quite strongly, although a Republican in New York is, for many people in America, an extremely dangerous left-wing liberal, for such is the reputation of New York. The position that Rudolph Giuliani had to take on, for example, social issues while he was Mayor is very much out of keeping with a lot of people in the base of the Republican party, but he does poll very well and we should not discount him. But again, I don't think he is going to make the cut when we get to 2008.

There are some lesser figures out there, like Governor Pataki (or ex-Governor Pataki, of New York, as he is going to be when Eliot Spitzer takes over from him), who said while I was in the States last week that he was considering making an announcement. I suspect he will throw his hat into the ring, but I don't think he stands a chance.

Now, my favourite, my tip for the top for 2008 – you heard it here first - on the Republican side, is Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts. Again, he is giving way to somebody else to take over the Governorship. Mitt Romney is an extremely interesting man. First of all, being a Republican Governor of Massachusetts is an achievement in itself. Secondly, he has done things – he's actually managed things, he's achieved things. When, a few years ago, there was a scandal over the Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City, I think if I remember rightly, Romney was sent in to sort it out, and sort it out he did. He has been a notably successful Governor of Massachusetts and has managed to get through the Massachusetts legislature something akin to a programme of universal health care and that is major achievement. He has made a lot of money – he is closely connected to New York money men. He is telegenic and he is very effective. He is also a Mormon and this begs a question. I heard his name everywhere when I was going round - I was in Washington, Boston, and New York City for two weeks and you pick up things – his name was mentioned time and time again and one of the questions I asked people was: *'Is being a Mormon an advantage or a disadvantage?'* and the answer depended on who you spoke to. He has said very clearly, when he walks out of his front door, he leaves his religion behind and I think that he will be able to overcome any disadvantages that he may have from subscribing to a religion which does not recognize Jesus Christ as the son of God, which is a problem for a lot of American voters.

So I think the conclusion that I would draw from this is that – we're long way away, but if you projected now 18 months forward, you might say that, as in 1992, there is an opening for a right wing candidate like Ross Perot to split the Republican vote. It may not come to that and people are very aware of the possibility, but it is a danger out there. I do not mention the name Condoleezza Rice in this and I do so advisedly. I don't think there is the slightest chance she will put her name forward for the Presidency.

On the Democratic side, wherever you go, people say, 'Hillary Clinton!' She hasn't officially declared yet, but she is gathering around her an extremely effective team and you have to ask yourself, 'Why is she gathering around her an extremely effective team if she is not going to run?' She has loads of money: she spent a lot of money in the Senate campaign in New York State, which she won with an extraordinary majority and she has been an extremely effective Senator. Everybody says she looks – by a country mile – the leading Democratic candidate, but there's always a 'but' when people say this, even Democrats, and the 'but' is usually baggage from the two presidencies of Bill Clinton and it could be that the baggage is Bill Clinton himself. A lot of people worry about the notion that, as she walks in the front door, Bill Clinton will be coming in through the side door. Some people think it is an advantage, some a disadvantage. But the enthusiasm for her, including in her own party, is not unalloyed. She has repositioned herself in many ways to appeal to a more centrist voter. She did this very effectively in New York State and she is doing it countrywide. She was, of course, originally a supporter of the war on Iraq. She has alienated people on the left of the Democratic party. But, to my mind, she does look very strong and, barring some kind of accident, I think she is likely to be the Presidential nominee for 2008 and I think she is the favourite.

There is a cast of other characters behind her who are ready to step forward if she stumbles. The flavour of the month, or the flavour of the quarter or the trimester, is without doubt the junior Senator from Illinois, Barack Obama. He is an extraordinary charismatic, fluent speaker, he has a very appealing message about bringing everybody together, eliminating extreme partisanship, bringing different levels of society together – rather a basic, simplistic message, if you will, but delivered with extraordinary eloquence and wonderful command of his audience. I say flavour of the month, flavour of the trimester – it sounds a bit dismissive there, but one has to remember that he has only been two years in this job. This is the first time he has been in the national legislature, he basically has no experience of doing anything at all except being persuasive and fluent, although he has a very great reputation and he has just written a book which is a bestseller. We cannot rule him out, but there is a whiff here, as I say, of a flavour that is not going to last.

Believe it or not, (well, it depends where you are coming from), Al Gore is still in the mix. I saw him give a TV interview over the weekend, in which I thought 'Dear God, he's learnt nothing about campaigning'. It was *leaden* and flat-footed. And yet and yet and yet... His movie about the environment, his perceptiveness at spotting the environment almost ten years ago now as something on which we – society and government – should focus, does stand him in very good stead and he has a following and he is out there. I don't think he would do it and I don't think he will be the party's nominee, but he cannot be discounted.

And there is a bunch of lesser figures. I think John Kerry is thinking of running again. I hope he decides not to, because he also has not cured the campaigning weaknesses which did for him. And there is also John Edwards, who was Kerry's running mate. I always rated him when I was in Washington and who knows, he may surprise us a bit. So, that was the snapshot that I took away and I do emphasise the word 'snapshot' because a week is a long time in politics in America as much as it is in the UK. But if I had to put my money anywhere right now, today, on this race, I would say Clinton versus Romney. So you can hold me to that, but I won't eat my hat if it doesn't work out like that!

The other thing I should say very briefly – quite apart from being in Washington when Tony Blair was there, I was also, of course, there when Jim Baker and Lee Hamilton made their

reports and I tell you this: there are lots of things refreshing about going to the United States and I am a huge lover of America and every time I go back, this sentiment is reinforced. There was phenomenal debate going on, about whether American foreign policy, America's place in the world, what do we do about Iraq, what do we do about Iran and Afghanistan. It is not just in the think tanks or among the wonks and the politicians, it's blazing away and it is very, very energizing and I think, extremely healthy. Americans may tear their hair out because they think, *'How in God's name are we ever going to get a unified position on anything with all this stuff that is going on?'*, but it is very, very healthy and I do have to contrast it with the sort of virtual stasis, the almost near-silence over here, where debate on these things only happens in rooms like this, where you have to climb four storeys to get here! You go into the House of Commons and it is shameful when Members of the Government get up and say, *'If you exercise your democratic right to have a debate, you are giving comfort to the enemy.'* It is in striking contrast to the situation over here.

It was very a dramatic – I will come back to Baker in a minute – mid-term result, but not unusual in American politics – in fact quite usual. I am always told the American people are much happier when the Congress is in the hands of one party and the White House is in the hands of the other party. So, in a sense, what we have now, with the Democrats in control of both Houses, as obviously from the beginning of next year, they will be chairing all the Committees, and the Republicans in the White House – to a lot of Americans, this is the natural order of things. It does not mean, in and of itself, that an administration cannot govern. It does not, in and of itself, mean that it is impossible to get legislation through. Actually, one of the most fertile periods of Bill Clinton's Administration was precisely after the Gingrich revolution in Congress and between that period and the implosion - or explosion, depending on your point of view - of Monica Lewinsky, he actually got stuff done and it is possible, in principle, for George W. Bush and his Administration to work with a Democratic Congress.

So dramatic though the news was of that great victory, its consequences don't have to be, necessarily, all that radical. For example, are we going to expect Democratic Chairmen of House and Senate Committees, to start setting in motion really radical inquiries into the genesis of the war, sniffing around to find somebody to impeach, all that sort of stuff or cut off funds for the war? I do not think any of that stuff is going to happen. I really don't. I think there will be a lot of snapping at the Administration's heels by some of the Committee chairmen. There will be an attempt to have greater oversight over the way in which the war is conducted, particularly as the Bush Administration has a very, very particular view of the primacy of Presidential powers. But Nancy Pelosi, the new Speaker of the House, has got up and said quite clearly that she is not in the business of conducting root-and-branch enquiries and that she is not going to encourage anybody to cut off funds to the Pentagon which were going to flow to US forces in Iraq. One always has to bear in mind how potent the argument is that anything that Congress do or does that endangers the lives of the fighting men and women in the region is death to the Congressman that pursues it and death to the Committee that may dare do it. So I do not think you are going see anything very radical like that.

A lot is being made of Nancy Pelosi herself, who is portrayed, usually by Republicans, as being a left-wing firebrand from California. She is certainly from California now, but in my humble view, she is anything but a left-wing firebrand. She has come out with a one hundred hours action programme for the Democratic majority in Congress. You look at the hundred hours programme and it is not very radical, actually. It is pretty uncontroversial – it has things like increasing the minimum wage, but there is nothing in there which is terribly

exciting and certainly, as far as foreign policy is concerned, it has virtually got nothing in it. You should not be surprised by this, because Nancy Pelosi is the daughter of a former Mayor of Baltimore, who was a classic machine politician from Baltimore, who used to sit down with a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle of the paper and on one side were the people who had done favours for him and on the other side were the people for whom he had done favours and apparently, when Nancy Pelosi was a child, she was given the task of writing the names down. So this is the culture which she has come from. Her father faced down Jimmy Hoffa over a dispute over garbage collection in Baltimore - I thought you might like the details! So this is the culture that Pelosi comes from – she is not an airy fairy Californian idealist who goes around in open-toed sandals and plays pipes and things like that. She is a tough, tough, tough politician of a very familiar kind.

On Baker-Hamilton, so long in the coming, so long in the gestation, so extensive in the leaking, so extensive in the pre-positioning, when the thing finally plopped out, in a sense we had already had the reactions to it before it had even reported. It is a very, very interesting political phenomenon and I am still not quite clear in my own mind what it means and that is partly because the consequences of the report are still to be played out, but I tell you one thing: there was never a hope in hell that Baker and Hamilton would report, bipartisan though the report was, and George W. Bush would leap up and say, *'Damn it, why didn't I think of that? You're absolutely right Jim, you're absolutely right Lee. I'm going to implement all 79 recommendations starting today and we'll finish by the end of next week.'* There was never any question of George W. Bush getting up there and saying, *'You're right, I'm wrong. I agree - let's move forward on the basis of Baker-Hamilton.'* He may in the end largely move forward on the basis of Baker-Hamilton, but it won't be done like that. There are all kinds of reasons for this: they are partly political, because the Baker-Hamilton report is now being very fiercely attacked by the right wing of the Republican Party as surrender. While I was there, there was an astonishing caricature on the front page of the New York Daily Post, with Baker and Hamilton portrayed as surrender monkeys. And even in the more intellectual parts of the right wing of the Republican Party, there is a very, very fierce attack on them for not even mentioning the democracy project and for counselling in effect for surrender. There was no way Bush was going to bind to that. Leave that aside, there is all kinds of family stuff here as well, because I think that George W. among others, blamed Baker and his chief of staff, his sidekick, Bob Zoellick, for the failure of George Bush Senior's campaign against Bill Clinton in 1992 and there is a history of animosity and competition there. So this was never going to happen. And what is going on now, which is very interesting, is that the President is now conducting, very publicly, post Baker and Hamilton, a review of policy in Iraq. This may actually extend to policy in the Middle East, for when we talk of Iraq, we are also talking about Israel and the Palestinians, because Baker and Hamilton threw that into the mix, as did Tony Blair, and what do you do, if anything, about relations with Syria and Iran? There is an NSC review of Iraq, there is a Pentagon review of Iraq, there is a State Department review of Iraq. Yesterday in Washington, the President met a group of retired generals and some academics, like Eliot Cohen, to talk through the options and the front page of today's Washington Post is about that encounter. So all this is going on, which I think is intended, among other things, firstly to show that the President is really thinking through options on Iraq in response to the way voters voted in the mid-terms, but also if you like, to relegate Baker-Hamilton to one review among many others. And what we are told is that, having considered the options (and let's bear in mind that the options are actually pretty narrow – there is not a great cornucopia of options here), he will then make a speech to the American people and lay out, as the White House calls it, the way forward. Some sources are saying the speech will be made before Christmas or before the end of the year, others are suggesting that

it may be folded into the State of the Union later in January of next year. I think it will be done before then, because I doubt that either the politicians or the people of the United States will want to wait that long, so we may get a speech before the end of the year.

There are whole swathes of foreign policy out there, which are not going to be touched by the mid-term results. Nothing is going to be touched. For example – I just pick this as one example as it is important and we have sort of forgotten about it: when the President visited India recently, he signed a treaty, very controversial, which effectively provides for nuclear co-operation between the United States and India, despite the fact that, of course, India has not signed up to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. At first there was a lot of doubt that Congress would be willing to ratify the Treaty. Well, they either have done so or are now on the way to doing so, so it is business as usual in some parts of the world. The India Treaty is a classical piece of *realpolitik*: India is too important to be ignored. Okay, they have not signed up to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, but their democratic credentials, their growing power in the world in all kinds of ways and the fact that Condoleezza Rice in her famous Foreign Affairs article in January 2000, identified India as one of the countries upon which the United States should focus, all this has come to pass a few years later and the change in party control in Congress will not make any difference at all. So the debate is going to be about the Middle East. It is going to be about, as I said, Israel and the Palestinians, Syria and Iran and in the centre of that, you have got Iraq. And when the President makes his speech, he will effectively answer the question: what impact have the mid-terms elections had on the future of US foreign policy until Bush leaves the scene in January 2009? I have talked to a lot of people about this and no one was really clear about what is going to happen. What you can say is that instinctively and temperamentally, President George W. Bush is hostile to the notion of dealing with Syria and Iran unless both those countries fulfil some prior conditions. Those conditions were made pretty plain, I think, in the Blair-Bush press conference and they were pre-conditions to which Tony Blair appeared to subscribe, although he is publicly very keen on bringing Syria and Iran into the negotiating fold. The President's instinct is not to energize the Israel-Palestinian peace process, at least not in a way that prejudices the relationship between Israel and the United States, and when Tony Blair talks about energizing that peace process and apparently he is going to go out himself and see what he can do, probably before the end of the year, I am not sure whether Blair's view of what needs to be done actually coincides with President Bush's. It is not at all clear to me that that is the case.

As for Iraq, the President has already said very clearly that there needs to be a change of tactics. But he still talks in terms of winning, of victory. He is not yet prepared to abandon language of that kind and I think, again, temperamentally he is extremely averse – and you can understand this - to the notion that the only real option that he has is to manage retreat as gracefully as may be possible. So I am not sure how all this will be put together by the President. There will be very, very strong countervailing force for him really to do something quite different which will lead to the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. There are, of course, the results of the mid-terms – the people have spoken. The President's popularity rating is showing at around 30% again. The polls all point to withdrawal either very soon from Iraq or quite soon from Iraq – that's what the polls seem to be telling us. And the other thing – it is a bit more speculative, but one or two people put this into my mind and the more I thought about it, the more credible it seemed – then there is the discipline, if you like, of the 2008 Presidential campaign. What one Republican said to me after another is, *'Whoever we choose to run for President in 2008, he (because there is no she there) will not want to be campaigning against the background of intense controversy over Iraq, with Americans losing*

their lives, and a Republican President being held to blame for this. So there is a very, very strong impulse on the Republican side, one way or another, to find some kind of resolution on Iraq before they go into the main campaign in 2008. And on the Democratic side, you might think the impulse was less strong for that to happen, and I think it is less strong, because Iraq can be a stick with which to beat the Republicans, but you have to be very careful because if in doing so, you in any sense seem to be prejudicing the lives of soldiers who are still fighting out there, you are going to get into really big trouble, as you do here. If it is Hillary Clinton who becomes the Presidential nominee, she of course was a supporter of the war and I think that she would be very happy to have Iraq resolved one way or another by the time she goes into full combat herself.

And the last thought I will leave you with – I am sorry if this is more like a stream of consciousness than a proper talk, but I am still fresh with this stuff and I am also jetlagged which makes it quite difficult – I am sort of flying two inches above the ground! The other thing to say is that I was talking to somebody who was a very great friend of mine when I was in Washington and one of my best contacts, a man of extraordinary frankness, whose name I probably ought to protect as we are on the record, who said to me: *'All this stuff is going on about Iraq, of course it's important, it's really important, but it's not as important as Afghanistan and Pakistan.'* He said: *'If we fail – and you can define failure however you like – in Afghanistan and Musharraf - despite a lot of ambiguity, as some people see it, in his position - realizes that having publicly supported the work of the United States, Britain and others to defeat Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, we have failed, there will be severe consequences.'* If in the end, we can't do the job and Kharzai continues to be the Mayor of Kabul rather than the President of Afghanistan and if in the end we have to cede great chunks of Afghanistan to a resurgent Taliban and maybe a resurgent Al-Qaeda, in this very experienced American observer's view, the repercussions for Musharraf would be very severe to the extent that it might threaten his position. And then, said this very experienced observer of Asia, the most dangerous place in the world would be Pakistan without Musharraf in charge, with nuclear weapons and I think, on that pretty depressing note, I will finish.

End

Sir Christopher Meyer is former UK Ambassador to Washington (1997 – 2003). He is presently Chairman of the Press Complaints Commission.