

General Brent Scowcroft
Remarks at the Center for National Policy's Edmund S. Muskie Awards Dinner
June 18, 2008

“Peter, I am not easily embarrassed, but you succeeded. After that intro it has got to be all downhill. I should quit while I’m ahead. But I thank you, Peter, for your leadership of this great organization. And I thank you and Tim and all of the members of CNP for this award for which I am really deeply touched and honored. It has for me a really special relationship which I will explain in a moment.

But I first have to say that I found myself tonight where I hoped never to be: following Joe Biden to the podium. There is nothing more to say and no time to say it. I’ll get back to that. I want to also congratulate Congressmen Fortenberry and Schiff. I believe a Nuclear Security Caucus is a great idea in a variety of ways and a very useful device. The Muskie Award is very touching to me for three pertinently different reasons.

First is the CNP, which represents for me bipartisanship, and an effort to have an honest sincere dialogue about the things that matter, and I’ll get back to that. So to me this is so meaningful because it touches the essence of what I think is important in our system.

And secondly, the name of the award: the Muskie Award. I first knew Ed Muskie when he was a senator, but I got to know him well in the later years of his life. He and I were two of the three members from the Tower Commission, which was the commission set up to look into the Iran-Contra affair. It was an unusual commission for many reasons. One of the most important was that it was the only one I know that ever had only three members.

And we worked long, and we worked hard, and this was a very serious national issue involving **probity** of a president, and during that, I got to know Ed Muskie very well. And as we worked late in the evenings, frequently he and I would ride home together, and we talked about everything with respect to our national interest and I found on this commission—two Republicans, one Democrat, looking at the activities of a Republican president—not a sign of partisanship in the debate among us. He was careful and judicious, with an explosive temper. When it would go up, the thermometer would go almost off the charts, but it would go back down almost as fast as it went up. But he was a marvelous human being, with a marvelous instinct for the national interest; he would have made a great president.

The third reason is that it is a real privilege and a pleasure for me to share this award with Senator Biden. He is for me a prime example for how our system ought to work. He came to the Senate the same year I went to the White House. I have worked with him and followed his career, and to me, he and his Republican colleagues on the Foreign Relations Committee exemplify what makes this system work.

You know, our Constitution did not set up an efficient system of government. It was not designed for efficiency. It was designed to protect the rights of individuals against over waning government. And it does that very well, but it does that sometimes at the expense of efficiency, because everywhere you turn there is a check and a block, so it's easy to keep things from happening.

What it takes to make things happen is the kind of cooperation, compromise, and focus on our strategic national interest which Joe Biden exemplifies. I am an apostle of bipartisanship, which to me does not mean seeking the lowest level, compromising all ends. What it means to me is a joint strategic concentration on what is best for America, and on that issue there can be serious differences of opinion.

The important thing is how you look at them, how you share views, how you learn, how you jointly come together to arrive at what we think is best for this country. It is not "gotcha" politics, which unfortunately are now all too common. They are bad not least because they are emotionally harmful, but I think they fail to give the American people the kind of clear view of what the issues are that are really facing us, rather than painting in black and blue, true and false colors, which obscure the difficulty of the issues we face.

Now for most of Senator Biden's comments, virtually all of them, I can just say "me too" and sit down, except for Iraq. And there I think we cannot concentrate on how to get out; what we need to concentrate on is how we can leave an Iraq which is a force for stability in the region rather than a force for chaos and conflict, because we don't want to walk out of Iraq and have to walk back into a Middle East itself that is in chaos. As quickly as we can, Senator Biden is exactly right, but judiciously quickly, not on a timetable.

I want to echo what the Senator said about the world we live in. I would say more than an inflection point. The end of the Cold War marked a historical discontinuity. We are in a very different world changing in fundamental ways. The old ideas and institutions, which worked so well in the Cold War, do not always fit this world. And it is hard to change them, because we are all used to the traditional way of doing things.

But the current world, and I'm not going to describe it in any detail, but I probably agree with, the one thing I want to emphasize in this different world is the impact of information technology on mankind. It has politicized the world's people, and the reaction has involved volatility which we have never known in the world today, which confuses everything that happens and makes it more difficult to control. Our current troubles are multiple, complex, vexing, and frequently very unfamiliar, but I would point out, and they are not apocalyptic in nature like the confrontation that we faced in the Cold War. We do face nuclear problems, but we do not face 10,000 Soviet warheads, so we ought not to be fearful of the problems that we face now.

They are difficult, they are unfamiliar, but we ought to face them with the confidence to know that if we face them right, in the company of our friends and allies,

they are all manageable. They require, though, honest debate and a frank exchange of ideas to discover and to explore and to find the best way to proceed, and that is what the Center for National Policy is designed to do.

And we need to get back to the degree we left, and I see my good friend Bennett Johnston here, and I yearn for the days when I can pick up the phone and talk to him and get his wisdom without any gainers or any losers in the process. And Zbig Brzezinski and I are doing a book of conversations in the attempt to show that you can agree, you can disagree, but we look at the fundamentals of the issues in order to understand them, not to get a “one-up” on the political opposition.

But all this is just why I am so proud to receive this award. From an institution, in the name of a man, and in the company of another who exemplify the way I think we must approach the great issues which currently confront us.”