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July 14, 2009

Netanyahu's Speech for Peace: Is Anyone Listening?

By Lanny J. Davis

http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jul/13/netanyahus-speech-for-peace-is-anyone-listening/?feat=home_columns&page=2&FORM=ZZNR

<http://pundits.thehill.com/2009/07/13/netanyahu%e2%80%99s-speech-for-peace-is-anyone-listening/>

<<http://www.washingtontimes.com/photos/2009/jul/07/50034/>>

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE: Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu has determined "it made no sense" to press the U.S. for assistance, a senior

Israeli official said.

I really don't get it. On June 14, less than a month after his meeting with President Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave one of the most comprehensive, thoughtful and highly personal speeches supporting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process of any Israeli prime minister in recent years, perhaps ever.

One would have thought his speech would have been big news in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere. Mr. Netanyahu for the first time clearly stated he would support a two-state solution, albeit with understandable requirements to guarantee Israel's security, despite leaving a different impression during last month's U.S. visit.

Yet, the reaction of governments and media in the U.S. and Europe was the functional equivalent of a tree falling in the forest with no one listening. Where it was covered, the writing emphasized the cynical and focused on the half-empty, rather than the half-full, glass.

So let's take a closer look at what could turn out to be a very significant, game-changing speech. It can be divided, essentially, into four parts: personal, historic, diplomatic and economic.

The personal aspect of the speech deals with the issue of peace. At one point, Mr. Netanyahu spoke directly to the Palestinian people: "We want to live with you in peace, as good neighbors. We want our children and your children to never again experience war: that parents, brothers and sisters will never again know the agony of losing loved ones in battle; that our children will be able to dream of a better future and realize that dream; and that together we will invest our energies in plowshares and pruning hooks, not swords and spears."

And then he reminded Palestinians that for him and his family, peace and war are quite personal: "I know the face of war. I have experienced battle. I lost close friends. I lost a brother. I have seen the pain of bereaved families. I do not want war. No one in Israel wants war."

Mr. Netanyahu also spent time in his speech on history, but not to relitigate the ancient argument over who lived in Palestine first or for the longest time. Rather, Mr. Netanyahu explained that the "root of the conflict" has been based on a fundamental misstatement of undeniable historical facts.

Palestinians have been taught that Israel was founded largely by alien foreigners, foisted on the native Palestinians by Europeans feeling guilty over the Holocaust. That misstatement has been the central rationale for Arab and Palestinian unwillingness to publicly recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

In fact, he points out, "the attacks against us began in the 1920s," 20 years before the Holocaust. And the undeniable historical fact is that "the Jewish people and the land of Israel go back over 3,500 years" - when Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, forefathers of all Jews; David and Solomon, ancient Israel's two greatest kings; and Isaiah and Jeremiah, two of

the Jewish religion's greatest spiritual prophets, all lived in what was then Judea and Samaria, which today is called the West Bank.

"The right of the Jewish people to a state in the land of Israel does not derive from the cascade of catastrophes that befell our people," the prime minister said. "There are those who say that if the Holocaust had not occurred, the state of Israel would never have been established. But I say if the state of Israel would have been established earlier, it is the Holocaust that would not have occurred."

Third, the prime minister addressed the two simple requirements for peace between Israel and the Palestinians: recognition and security.

As to the first, he put it quite simply: "A fundamental prerequisite for ending the conflict is a public, binding and unequivocal Palestinian recognition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people."

As to the security, it is also quite simple: Palestine must be demilitarized, as guaranteed by the international community, with open skies, no military alliances with hostile powers, and "effective security measures to prevent weapons smuggling into the territory - real monitoring, and not what occurs in Gaza today."

Once these two issues of recognition and security for Israel have been guaranteed, the rest of the difficult issues seem to come much easier: no more new settlements, with some wiggle room for the natural growth of current settlements caused by families growing; equitable treatment and assistance in placing refugees in land and homes outside of Israel (to preserve the essence of historic Israel as a Jewish state).

And on the always controversial issue of Jerusalem, Mr. Netanyahu was deftly ambiguous: "Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, must remain undivided, with continued religious freedom for all faiths." That does not seem to exclude Palestinian de facto control over certain parts of Jerusalem and certainly over their holy places.

Finally, the prime minister expressed a clear and concrete vision of economic prosperity for Palestinians in partnership with Israel. Indeed, he stated that such economic prosperity can come even before a final peace agreement is reached.

"An economic peace is not a substitute for a political peace but an important element in achieving it. Together we can undertake projects that overcome the scarcities of our region, like water desalination, or maximize its advantages, like developing solar energy, and exploiting our geographic location by laying gas and petroleum lines and establishing transportation links between Asia, Africa and Europe. ...

"Together we can develop industrial areas that will generate thousands of jobs and develop tourist sites that will attract millions of visitors eager to walk in the footsteps of history - in Nazareth and in Bethlehem, around the walls of Jericho and the walls of Jerusalem, on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, and the baptismal site on the banks of the Jordan."

Who cannot be moved by these words? Perhaps Mr. Netanyahu has it right - a new sequencing of the peace process: First, economic partnership and prosperity between Israelis and Palestinians; and then peace, not the other way around.

It could not have been by accident that Mr. Netanyahu chose to deliver his remarkable speech at the Begin-Sadat Center at Bar-Ilan University. It was slightly more than 30 years ago, on March 26, 1979, that Prime Minister Menachem Begin, as the leader of the right-wing Likud or "Consolidation" Party, joined with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and signed a historic peace agreement between Israel and Egypt.

Now another man of the right, another Likud prime minister some three decades later, seems poised to make the lasting peace between Israel and Palestinians that has so long eluded his predecessors.

One wonders whether Mr. Netanyahu might also be thinking: If Richard Nixon could go to China because of a base on the right that trusted him, then I can bring peace and prosperity between Israelis and Palestinians.

Let's hope - and pray - that he is right.

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Lanny J. Davis, a Washington lawyer and former special counsel to President Clinton, served as a member of President George W. Bush's Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board. He is the author of "Scandal: How 'Gotcha' Politics Is Destroying America."

This piece appeared in Mr. Davis' weekly column, "Purple Nation," in the Washington Times and the Hill.com/PunditsBlog today, Monday, July 13, 2009.

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