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Fred Thompson delivers a foreign policy speech at the Policy Exchange in London June 19, 2007

Thank you very much. Charles Moore, Anthony Browne, Dean Godson, distinguished guests: I appreciate the cordial welcome to London. I always look forward to visiting the United Kingdom, and this time around I couldn't ask for a better host than the Policy Exchange.

We have a few policies back home that we'd like to exchange, and think tanks like this are the place to come. After just five years, the Policy Exchange ranks among the best, and the fine reputation of your work has reached Washington as well. I congratulate all of you, and I thank you for the hospitality.

Your kind invitation brings me here just as Great Britain prepares to greet an incoming prime minister.

Back in the U.S., we're able to watch the House of Commons' "Prime Minister's Question Time," which Mr. Brown will now endure. I've thought that America needed a weekly question and answer period between the President and Congress. But in the past few months I've decided it isn't such a good idea.

Your system also allows a change in the head of government at a moment's notice. Even your general election campaigns are mercifully brief.

Of course we believe in long presidential campaigns in the U.S. Most American politicians are afraid they won't be considered serious candidates until they've made a promise a hundred times and spent a hundred million dollars. Though every now and then you still get some slow-poke who takes his time before announcing.

I congratulate Mr. Brown, and I wish him well as the 53rd prime minister of the United Kingdom. And if you'll allow me a word about the 52nd … we'll miss him. There are disputes of party here that are strictly British affairs. But sometimes the better points of statesmen possibly are seen more clearly at a distance.

We are profoundly grateful for the friendship of the British people, and in America we'll always remember Mr. Blair as a gallant friend, even when it did him no good politically.

When we in the States take the measure of your leaders, their party affiliation doesn't really count for a whole lot. It's been this way for a while now, at every moment when it mattered. It was true in the days of Churchill and Roosevelt … of Thatcher and Reagan … and Blair and Bush.

Differences of party and domestic policy are incidental, compared to the bigger considerations that define Britain and America as allies. On both sides of the Atlantic, what matters most are the commitments we share, and the work we are called to do in common. This work is based upon the principles we hold – primarily, the right of free people to govern themselves. We also believe that the rule of law, market economies, property rights, and trade with other nations are the underpinnings of a free society.

When historians of the modern era speak of the great democracies, of civilization and its defenders, that's us they're talking about – we and our democratic friends across Europe and beyond.

In the long progress of the world toward liberty, it was not by chance that this lowly province of the Roman Empire became a great teacher of democracy and the model of self-government. And it wasn't just luck that turned a troublesome British colony into the inspiration for all those who seek freedom. There is a reason why Britain and America were thrown together as partners in this world. The things that unite the American and British peoples? They don't change with the names of leaders or with the passing of years.

It was Harold MacMillan who best summed up the shared experiences of British and American leaders in the last century. In his later years, Lord Stockton was asked what he considered the greatest challenge in all his years as a statesman. And in that English way, he put it in a word: "Events, my dear boy, events."

Events often have a way of intruding upon the plans of free people. As a rule, people in democratic societies prefer to take care of the business of life. They raise families. They work and they trade. They create wealth and they share it. Above all in free societies, we live by the law – and, at our best, we look after one another, too. Yet in every generation, "events" can be counted on to change the plan, sometimes in tragic ways.

Often the cause of our grief is a misplaced trust in the good intentions of others. In our dealings with other nations, people in free countries are not the type to go looking for trouble. We tend to extend our good will to other nations, assuming that it will be returned in kind. No matter how clear the signals, sometimes in history even the best of men failed to act in time to prevent the worst from happening.

The United States and the United Kingdom have learned this lesson both ways – in great evils ignored, and in great evils averted. We learned it from a World War that happened and, in the decades afterward, from the World War that didn't happen.

We must conclude that the greatest test of leadership – in your country or mine, in this time or any other – can be simply stated. We must shape events, and not be left at their mercy. And in all things, to protect ourselves and to assure the peace, the great democracies of the world must stick together. We must be willing to make tough decisions

These are not considerations relevant only to the people of Great Britain and the United States. The relationship between the United States and all of Europe is valued by both sides and has benefited the world. NATO has not only been an effective tool for our efforts, it symbolizes our commonality.

Changes in leadership on both sides of the Atlantic will give us new opportunities. Often in the history of nations, leaders rise to meet the times. These times require those with the wisdom and courage to see past the next election cycle.

The United States and our European allies must begin to forge a new understanding that matches the times we live in. This must be an understanding based upon candor if we are to come closer to agreement as to the nature of the challenges we face.

I have great hope for such a new understanding among NATO allies. We would never want to look back on a campaign we'd undertaken to realize we'd fallen short for lack of commitment or material support. Today our enemies do not doubt our military strength. They do question our determination. Our efforts will require ongoing dialogue based upon mutual respect and mutual interests.

For many Americans, there is a concern that even among our friends, some people are instinctively uncomfortable with U.S. power. Some on the Continent speak of the need for Europe to balance U.S. influence. Americans worry that this sentiment could, over time, lead to an uncoupling of the alliance. And if constraining U.S. power is that important, would our European friends be comfortable with other powers serving as a counterweight to the United States?

Some who seek to check U.S. power believe that legitimacy may only be conferred by international consensus as represented by the UN Security Council. They ask, "If a country can invade another nation for its own good reasons, what is the logical stopping point?"

The American response is to ask how, then, does one justify non-Security-Council-sanctioned actions, such as Kosovo? What are nations allowed to do when the UN cannot muster the political will to act? How many countries must be involved in an action before legitimacy is conferred? Is it just European countries that count? And, how do we deal with problems in concert when many of us don't agree on the extent or nature of the problem?

For our part, we in the United States must make a better case for our views and our actions. It is possible that things that are perfectly obvious to us may not be so obvious even to those who wish us well. We must be willing to listen and we must be willing to share our intelligence to the maximum extent appropriate.

We must be prepared to make our case not just privately, but to the people of Europe and the world in order to build political support for cooperation. The world is not stronger if America is weaker – or is perceived to be weaker. The same is true of Britain and truer still of our NATO alliance. And we must be capable of making that case.

In return, it is fair to expect that our allies will not put their trade and commercial interests above world security. It is also fair to ask that Europeans consider the consequences if they are wrong about the threat to the Western world.

Many in Europe simply have a different view from that of the United States as to the threat of radical Islamic fundamentalism. They think that the threat is overblown. That despite September 11th, and July 7th and other attacks in Europe and elsewhere, America is the main target and therefore the problem is basically an American one. The fact that no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq at a particular point in time resolves the matter for them. Also, they see no meaningful connection between terrorist groups and countries like Iran.

Admittedly, even some in America think that the threat is overblown, and that if we had not gone into Iraq, we'd have no terrorism problem.

However, most Americans feel differently. We understand that the Western world is in an international struggle with jihadists who see this struggle as part of a conflict that has gone on for centuries, and who won't give up until Western countries are brought to their knees. I agree with this view. I believe that the forces of civilization must work together with common purpose to defeat the terrorists who for their own twisted purposes have murdered thousands, and who are trying to acquire technology to murder millions more.

When terrorists in their video performances pledge more and bigger attacks to come, against targets in both Europe and America, these are not to be shrugged off as idle boasts. They must be taken at their word.

When the president of Iran shares his nightmare visions before cheering crowds, those are not just the fanatic's version of an empty applause line. The only safe assumption is that he means it. If we know anything from modern history, it is that when fanatical tyrants pledge to "wipe out" an entire nation, we should listen. We must gather our alliance, and do all in our power to make sure that such men do not gain the capability to carry out their evil ambitions.

Of course, diplomacy is always to be preferred in our dealings with dangerous regimes. But I believe diplomacy, as Franklin Roosevelt put it, is more than "note writing." The words of our leaders command much closer attention from adversaries when it is understood that we and our allies are prepared to use force when force is necessary.

The campaign in Afghanistan is a prime example of this, both as a largely successful effort against a terrorist state and as a logical extension of the mission of NATO, which now reaches far beyond the boundaries of Europe.

As in Iraq, the effort has involved great sacrifice from the brave sons and daughters of Britain. By their valor, and by the sustained action of NATO in Afghanistan, we have shown our seriousness of purpose against terrorism … an ability to move beyond the military models of Cold War days … and a capacity to shift tactics and technology to fight an enemy who defends no state and observes no code.

Even in the midst of all the divisiveness with regard to our actions in Iraq, the United States, Great Britain and our coalition should be proud of what we have averted. Imagine Saddam Hussein and his murderous sons in power today successfully defying the international community and free to pursue weapons programs.

Of course political realism is back in the ascendancy since the difficulties in Iraq. It's true that we have learned that geography, history, and ethnicity are important factors to consider in making decisions regarding today's enemies.

We've also been reminded of the importance of preparation, of alliances, and the continuing support of our people.

But that does not change the fact that we sometimes must address events in far-away places that endanger our people. Or that we believe in universal values that do not allow us to ignore wholesale human suffering.

Realism? Yes. But also idealism, which is what makes us different from our enemies.

We should also remember that beyond the War on Terror, there are other threats we must meet together that extend well into the future. One way or another, the challenges we face today will recede. Other challenges to our shared interests and security have not been waiting patiently in line for our attention.

Some cannot yet be seen, but it is obvious that our energy needs for example are not going away. Disruptions in energy supplies, sharp price increases and thuggish behavior by energy suppliers are threats to all democracies with growing economies. Also, rapid military build-ups by non-democratic nations should be of concern.

More and more, if things go wrong in disputes that were once considered just regional problems, there will be no “over there” or “over here.” We’ll all be affected. Globalization is not limited to economic matters. As we go through these perilous times, we must keep firmly in mind the things that bind us together, not disagreements.

We’ve been through a lot together, our two nations – and not just in the storied exploits of our parents’ generation. Though there are many moments in British political history from which leaders today can take instruction, there is one in particular that I’ve always admired in the career of Sir Winston Churchill.

It was when Neville Chamberlain died in November 1940. In memorializing in the House of Commons his longtime adversary, Churchill pronounced the bitter controversies put to rest. He said, quote, “History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days.”

In the end, he reflected, “The only guide to a man is his conscience; the only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions.” We are “so often mocked by the failure of our hopes and the upsetting of our calculations; but with this shield, however the fates may play, we march always in the ranks of honour.”

Maybe it’s the actor in me that admires this scene so much. It’s a moment that no script-writer could improve upon. I am struck by its spirit, the magnanimity and generosity of the man … the willingness to let old arguments go, and move on to great objectives held in common.

We in this alliance have had our own share of hopes mocked and plans upset. And now it is time to shake off the disappointments, to let go of controversies past, and to press on together toward the great objectives. To ensure security for our people. To be a force for stability in the world. To remain the stalwart friends of freedom.

For our part, we in the United States have never had occasion to doubt the fortitude and faithfulness of the British people. As much as ever, we count ourselves lucky to call the United Kingdom our closest ally, and we are proud to call you our finest friend.

Thank you.