



Letter from the Rabbi

White House Report, Part II January 2011

Dear Haverim,

Last month, I shared with you some of the wonderful and fascinating speakers from our annual White House Fellows Conference. Let me continue with former Secretary of State Colin Powell.

To someone's question if this was the "worst of times," (former White House Fellow) Colin Powell responded: what about 1968-1976 with assassinations, race riots, Vietnam and the Cold War – that was serious; this we'll get through much more easily. He also addressed the "gotcha" mentality of the 24/7 media and criticized both FOX and MSNBC. We were better off years ago, he said, when the "test pattern" came on TV and we went to bed early. America was built on compromise; the Constitution couldn't have been passed without it, even if the evils of slavery remained intact for 3/4 of a century more. (When Powell spoke these words, it was truly poignant and uncomfortable, but also historically true.) He criticized the Republicans for focusing on strategy and not policy, and promoting "Joe The Plumber" and "birthers" in place of alternative proposals on healthcare and the economy. He also made it clear that President Obama has consulted him on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

National Security Advisor General James Jones met with us on his last day in office. Joking about "when you are being run out of town, make it look like a parade," he obviously felt angry at the revelations of White House infighting revealed by Bob Woodward's book "Obama's Wars." A modest and decent soldier, Jones wasn't prepared for the ego clashes of Washington and the necessity of pro-forma niceties when dealing with Congress. He spoke frankly about the absurdity of the Department of Homeland Security having to report to 104 Congressional committees and subcommittees and how threats are now transnational, economic and technological and not just political and military. We've got to reshape our bureaucracy; country desks are outdated; we need interagency jurisdiction and a focus on regional issues. We're in a more competitive world, so "export control" of technology is now a national security issue.

Happily, he continued, the United States has restored its influence and image in the world because it has re-learned the lessons of treating other nations with respect and dignity. The NSA has to advise the President not only on Iraq and Afghanistan, but on how to avoid the next Iraq and Afghanistan. As for Iran, Jones was optimistic that it will begin to feel the power of international sanctions in six months. In regard to Islamic terrorism, General Jones knew as far back as 1983, when our Marine barracks were bombed in Beirut, that "things were changing forever."

One of the most popular speakers over the years at the White House Fellows Conference is David Gergen and, once again, he didn't disappoint. A moderate Republican, Harvard professor, CNN analyst, adviser to

Republican presidents and President Clinton's Chief of Staff, Gergen was lovingly introduced by his daughter-in-law, a former White House Fellow. Afraid that he wasn't going to tell us anything we didn't know, he quoted Senator John Warner who said, when he married Elizabeth Taylor, "I know what to do, but I'm not sure that I can make it interesting anymore."

Gergen was both hopeful and worried. Thirty-five years ago, we had a 30% dependence on foreign oil, today it's 60%. Although we now have some impressive schools, inner city education hasn't changed much in 25 years and, for even longer, both parties have spoken about reforming Social Security. Yet, on all of these issues, only safe steps have been taken. We lack the vision and, even more, the political will to make dramatic changes. The rising tide of both mediocrity and rhetoric continues and, today, we no longer feel so powerful as a country, wondering if our best days are behind us.

He decried the vicious hostility to President Obama ("we want our country back") as well as the tension between the White House and the business community. While the United States Chamber of Commerce sits just across Lafayette Park from the White House, the tension between many CEOs and the President is unprecedented. Therefore, he urged that more business people be brought into the White House and that the President convenes a Camp David summit to heal the antagonism.

Speaking of healing, one of the most emotionally moving presentations was by "Pay Czar" Ken Feinberg. Joking that his Lithuanian Jewish grandmother would be shocked to find out that he is called a Czar, Feinberg addressed the issue of "What Is A Life Worth?" Feinberg has been entrusted, time and again, by our government with adjudicating claims after disasters – Agent Orange, Virginia Tech, the BP Oil Spill and, most painfully, "9/11." He spoke about the difficulty of providing full justice to those victims and their families and how he had to "slow down the process" to allow for grief. One needs to be a rabbi, more than a lawyer or an accountant, he said, because people want to tell you their stories. So, he agreed to meet individually with the families of the 9/11 victims and, instead of asking for more money, they just wanted to be heard. They showed Feinberg wedding pictures and Bar Mitzvah videos and he listened to the tape of their last messages from planes or the Twin Towers. Senator Ted Kennedy told him: "Don't let 10% of the people get 90% of the money." Others tried to calculate the "worth" of a banker over a janitor or a young person over a retiree. How does one do the right thing?, Feinberg asked. Is being "well intentioned" always a good idea? What about the victims of the first Twin Towers bombing a few years before – should they have gotten governmental compensation, too? Feinberg's presentation raised the eternal moral questions of justice and mercy as well as human responsibility.

Finally, one of the most unpretentious and delightful speakers was Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Even after 18 years as a judge, she was still amazed at this newest stage in her life. And a stage it was. She wasn't ready for the celebrity aspects, for she can no longer cross the street in a sweatsuit lest her picture appear on the front page of newspapers. She has to turn down hundreds of speaking requests that come to her each week and she is constantly pointed at in restaurants and on the street.

But what she really wants to do is to concentrate on being a good Supreme Court Justice, putting the surreal aspects behind her. Truly a "wise Latina" (used pejoratively at her confirmation hearings), she joked about the diversity of the Court – six Catholics and three Jews. Yes, there will eventually be Protestants again and

more women (three isn't enough), she said, as well as federal defenders and academicians.

Very sweetly Justice Sotomayor spoke about calling her mother for comfort each morning before her confirmation hearings, the excitement and anxiety of her interview with President Obama, and about the moments in life "that choke you up."

She concluded her remarks to us with the wish that each one of us experiences the joy of loved ones – family, relatives and friends – carrying us in their hearts, so proud of us and surrounding us with love. That's what she experienced and continues to experience since the day of her nomination.

So, let me wish you the same. May you feel the love and support of others as you give your love and support to others in the coming year.

B'shalom,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Arnie Rachlis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rabbi Arnold Rachlis

P.S. To view the link to Tom Brokaw's report on the White House Fellows program on NBC Nightly News (3 minutes), please click <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032619/#37650140> or cut and paste it into your browser.