



“WE ARE NOT A PAPER TIGER” SENATOR WILLIAM COHEN AT THE FIRST CAMDEN CONFERENCE

The Monday, February 22, 1988 edition of the Bangor Daily News carried two news reports on a conference held the previous Saturday in Camden entitled “The Making of American Foreign Policy: Myths and Realities”. The three most prominent speakers at the first in what is now approaching a quarter century of Camden Conferences on Foreign Relations, were Brent Scowcroft (soon to be named National Security Advisor in the first Bush administration), who gave the opening talk at the Camden Library; Senator William Cohen (later to serve as Secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration), who gave a luncheon talk at the Camden Congregational Church; and Lawrence Eagleburger (soon to be named Deputy Secretary of State), who gave the closing address at the Rockport Opera House.

While a certain tilt towards a native son (Cohen had been mayor of Bangor) might have been expected, the BDN may have gone a bit overboard in devoting seventeen of the twenty-three paragraphs in the two articles to his remarks; Scowcroft and Eagleburger combined were allotted only five. The remaining four speakers, from the CIA, the Government of Japan, the Washington Post Editorial Board and the U.S. business community might as well not have shown up, as far as the BDN was concerned.

Skewed coverage notwithstanding, Cohen’s remarks stand up very well to the passage of time. His arguments for an expanded role for Congress in the foreign policy process (Scowcroft and Eagleburger argued the opposite) were well-timed, coming as they did on the heels of the Iran-Contra scandal, a major embarrassment for the Reagan administration. It provided, in Cohen’s words, “a lesson of what can happen when the President and his advisors seek to either circumvent or exclude the checks-and-balances that are provided by Congress.” As a result of the scandal, Cohen and a bipartisan group of Senators, including his Maine colleague George Mitchell (see the article on Mitchell elsewhere in this series), proposed legislation requiring notification to Congress of covert actions. Carrying their cooperation even farther, Cohen and Mitchell later that year published a joint account of the scandal titled Men of Zeal: A Candid Inside Story of the Iran-Contra Hearings.

Cohen’s emphasis in his Camden remarks on the negative effects of political polarization on foreign policy also has a very contemporary ring to it. “We have not had a bipartisan approach to foreign policy perhaps since Vietnam; certainly not since the Watergate era. And we have become more and more polarized along political lines. When that happens we cannot have an effective foreign policy. When you do have cooperation...that requires a recognition that Congress also has a role to play in foreign policy.”

One of the illustrative examples cited by Cohen provided the BDN with the lead for its account of the Conference. “Is the United States becoming a paper tiger?” The question stemmed from the Senator’s account of a meeting with a senior Japanese official in 1979, at

a time when controversy still swirled over President Carter's attempts to fulfill a 1976 campaign pledge to withdraw US troops from South Korea. (Carter's efforts were ultimately blocked by opposition from within his own administration, from Congress, and from the Asian countries most directly affected). Responding to a request to express Japan's real view of the US, the official replied, "We think you're a paper tiger. We think you're unable to reach a consensus on any of the major problems confronting you. Frankly we don't think you're reliable any more."

Shortly after his return from his Asia trip, Cohen was speaking to 250 students at the Southern Maine Vocational Technical Institute on another still-contemporary theme - - cuts in the education budget. Recalling his meeting in Japan he asked the students "If Japan is attacked tomorrow, how many here will come to their aid?" To Cohen's dismay, 75% replied in the negative, causing him to realize that "the Japanese were right to be concerned about our commitment".

Senator Cohen's long service on the Senate Armed Services and Intelligence committees and his unusually strong record of bipartisanship (the journalist David Halberstam called him a "maverick centrist") made him an astute choice to succeed William Perry as Secretary of Defense in the second Clinton administration. He thus became the third such appointee from the opposition party to serve a US President in that capacity since the Second World War. Robert Gates, in the Obama administration was to become the fourth.

~ Robert Rackmales, December 2011

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