Like Ken Duberstein, I should start by saying how well David Gergen has set the table for us, and I can stipulate agreement with a lot of the things he’s said. I’d like to pick up on something that David said in his opening remarks and maybe italicize it and amplify it a bit. That is, I think, the irrefutable statement that the in-box sitting on the desk in the Oval Office on January 20, 2009, will be the most daunting ever. I would just accentuate how difficult the problems are in the international relations and foreign policy and national security arena.

Even if we were to only consider those folders in the in-box relating to the greater Middle East, it includes two wars which will almost certainly still be underway; a failed, if not a stalled, if not seriously damaged, Arab-Israeli peace process; and, of course, multiple other crises in the region, as well as a looming nuclear threat in the case of Iran.

Even if you were just to limit the in-box to those issues, the president would have the toughest job ever awaiting a newcomer to that office. But you can’t limit it to those. In fact, a common phenomenon in government, which so many in this room in many different governments have observed and experienced, is likely to kick in. That is that governments and U.S. administrations are like individuals in one respect. They have limited energies, limited attention spans, and limited scopes of attention. There is a very real underlying challenge facing the next president. That is that the issues facing him or her in the greater Middle East will be in and of themselves so preoccupying and so demanding of political skill both at home and abroad and also the use of smart power, including the threats of force, that that president and his or her administration will have a very difficult time tending properly to other issues.

Yet, I want to focus on precisely those. One gets very little attention and is regional. Two are global and get more attention, but nowhere near as much as they need to get.

The regional issue I will mention just in passing, and I’m inspired to do so partly by what Joe said in his welcoming remarks this morning, about the way in which the Trilateral Commission is reaching out in Asia to at least China and India. I would hope that the Trilateral Commission over time, when it takes other bites at the apple, would extend what is now the North American group to be a hemispheric group. The United States of America suffers from attention deficit syndrome, when it comes to our own region. Uncle Sam is a little bit like some of us who’ve reached a certain age where we’re getting a little stiff in our necks, and we
find it easier to look left and right—which is to say east and west—than it is to look down, that is: south.

We gringos have had a habit of paying attention to our own hemisphere—and that, by the way, also includes looking north—only when there are crises. Then we run around in small circles and try to do something about it. An example is if the bearded guy in Cuba allows a Soviet premier to put missiles 90 miles off our shore. Or if somebody named Hugo comes along and makes a career out of trying to drive us nuts, or if there's a meltdown of a neighboring economy that threatens to spread to the whole neighborhood.

We are very, very bad at maintaining sustained attention to a region which has major implications for both the world and the United States in the realms of energy, migration, drugs, trade, and also the gap between winners and losers in the process of globalization. Enough on that subject, although I hope we can return to it, if not in this conversation, in another context both as an institution and speaking as a North American in other contexts as well.

The two global issues are in some ways obvious, but I want to focus on them nonetheless. They are nuclear proliferation and climate change. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that if the next president serves for two terms, that administration will encompass virtually the entire period when we, the world, have to deal adequately with the spread of nuclear weapons and with the warming of the planet.

I will take them in order, and I'll start with the easier of the two, by far, which is proliferation. The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) is in real danger of unraveling in the course of the next several years. The NPT envisioned or permitted five nuclear armed states, but with the understanding that those five nuclear armed states would, over time, drastically reduce and ultimately eliminate their nuclear arsenals. There are now nine nuclear weapons states. If that dynamic, which we can come back to on its specifics, continues, the prediction that John F. Kennedy made, both during the debates in 1960 and again not long before he was assassinated, that we would see a world with, whatever he said, 15 or 20 nuclear weapons states, that prediction may turn out to have been premature but not wrong. I can imagine upwards of, certainly well over 20 and maybe 25 or 30 nuclear weapons states if the NPT really comes apart.

I will be specific with four letters: CTBT, Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. I would hope that the next president of the United States would put the CTBT on the docket for ratification by the United States Senate within, if not minutes, if not hours, then within days or weeks of taking office, and that the Senate would thereby have a chance to undo its most colossal blunder in recent history, which was its refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, in what will have been ten years before the next president takes office.

Now on the issue of climate change, as I look around this room, I am a little daunted myself, because there are so many people here. I'm looking at John Deutch, who knows the science of this issue infinitely better than I do. One piece of good news is that all of us have gotten an education on climate change, and I think all of us, as citizens, know enough to recognize what is now pretty much an indisputable consensus among respectable scientists.
That is that we have a very, very short time to take that curve, and I'm doing this for the benefit of you sitting out there, which now goes from here to here in the emission of CO2 equivalence of greenhouse gases, and flatten out as much as possible that curve, so that the consequent curve, which represents the increase in the mean temperature rise of the planet, is also flattened out, so that the following does not happen: so that we do not punch through what many scientists believe to be a tipping point of 4.5 degrees Fahrenheit increase in the mean temperature of the planet sometime around the middle of the century. And it flows from that, but we do not have until the middle of the century to begin the process of flattening the curve that we can control.

That means we'd have to move very, very soon. Going back to a point that Ken alluded to, unlike rescuing the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which essentially is a money-saver because it involves a lot of stuff that we don't have to do, we don't have to build and we don't have to spend money. There is no question that doing what is necessary with regard to climate change is, indeed, going to involve not just costs, as Ken said, but another word which you don't hear a lot on the campaign trail, which is sacrifice. And change in lifestyle. That is going to fall to all the leaders and certainly all the leaders of the so-called “dirty dozen” countries that are major contributors to climate change.

But it's going to fall to one leader more than any other, and that's the next president of the United States for two reasons. First of all, he or she is going to have to lead a process in this country whereby we reduce our own contribution to the problem, even though we've now fallen into second place behind China. There are actually three reasons. Second, we have to set an example for the rest of the world. And, third, we still have enough legitimacy, I think, as an international leader, to put in place the international structures and arrangements that will be necessary to bring this about.

Now we are not very good in the United States at governments of national unity. Our system doesn't lend itself to that, as much as it does in other kinds of governments, but I still think we have the capacity to do that, particularly on the issues that I have stressed here.

I would conclude with a final personal and subjective judgment, in a somewhat less somber mode or tone than what I've said up until now. As we listened to Ken's reminder of the cast of characters that we were looking at among those seeking the presidency not many months ago, we all heard the names of some plausible, good potential presidents that have now dropped out. But that leaves us with three candidates who represent I would call “a happy problem,” in that any one of them has the ability—and certainly the incentive—to rise to the multiple challenges I’ve described.

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