

From the Donkey's Mouth: Exclusive Post AIPAC Interview with John Edwards

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The American Prospect - Ezra Klein - "The political elite have begun to leave him, the religious leaders have begun to leave him, the people aren't happy with him, for at least two reasons: one, they don't like his sort of bellicose rhetoric, and second, he was elected on a platform of economic reform and helping the poor and the middle class, and he hasn't done anything. In fact, while he was traveling, the leaders of the legislature sent him a letter saying, 'when are you gonna pay attention to the economic problems of our country.' So, I think we have an opportunity here that we need to be taking advantage of." - Democratic Presidential Candidate John Edwards on Iranian President Ahmadinejad.

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The following is an interview conducted on February 2, 2007 at the Washington, D.C., Hilton. The interview is slightly edited for length, coherence, and the removal of a short off-the-record passage.

John Edwards On Iran, Iraq, and Israel

Ezra Klein

The American Prospect
February 3, 2007

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John Edwards: Do you mind me taking just a minute to lay out where I am on Iran and then you can just ask anything you want? Here's my view about what we ought to be doing in Iran.

Number one, you have a radical leader, Ahmadinejad, who is politically unstable in his own country. The political elite have begun to leave him, the religious leaders have begun to leave him, the people aren't happy with him, for at least two reasons: One, they don't like his sort of bellicose rhetoric, and second, he was elected on a platform of economic reform and helping the poor and the middle class, and he hasn't done anything. In fact, while he was traveling, the leaders of the legislature sent him a letter saying, 'when are you gonna pay attention to the economic problems of our country.' So, I think we have an opportunity here that we need to be taking advantage of.

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First, America should be negotiating directly with Iran, which Bush won't do. Second, we need to get our European friends, not just the banking system, but the governments themselves, to help us do two things -- put a group, a system of carrots and sticks on the table. The carrots are, we'll make nuclear fuel available to you, we'll control the cycle, but you can use it for any civilian purpose. Second, an economic package, which I don't think has been seriously proposed up until now. Because their economy is already struggling, and it would be very attractive to them. And then on the flip side, the stick side, to say if you don't do that, there are going to be more serious economic sanctions than you've seen up until now. Now of course we need the Europeans for this, cause they're the ones with the economic relationship with Iran, but the whole purpose of this is number one, to get an agreement. Number two, to isolate this radical leader so that the moderates and those within the country who want to see Iran succeed economically, can take advantage of it.

Now that's on the one hand, the flip side of this is what happens if America were to militarily strike Iran? Well you take this unstable, radical leader, and you make him a hero -- that's the first thing that'll happen. The Iranian people will rally around him. The second thing that will happen is they will retaliate. And they have certainly some potential for retaliating here in the United States through some of these terrorist organizations they're close to, but we've got over a hundred thousand people right next door. And most people believe that they have an infrastructure for retaliation inside Iraq. So, that's the second thing that'll happen. And the third thing is there are a lot of analysts who believe that an air strike or a missile strike is not enough to be successful. To be successful we'd actually have to have troops on the ground, and where in the world would they come from? So, to me, this is the path.

Ezra Klein: So, I just want to get it very clear, you think that attacking Iran would be a bad idea?

JE: I think it would have very bad consequences.

EK: So when you said that all options are on the table?

JE: It would be foolish for any American president to ever take any option off the table.

EK: Can we live with a nuclear Iran?

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JE: I'm not ready to cross that bridge yet. I think that we have lots of opportunities that we've ? We're not negotiating with them directly, what I just proposed has not been done. We're not being smart about how we engage with them. But I'm not ready to cross that bridge yet. And I think the reason people react the way they do -- I understand it, because, when George Bush uses this kind of language, it means something very different for most people. I mean when he uses this kind of language ?options are on the table,? he does it in a very threatening kind of way -- with a country that he's not engaging with or making any serious diplomatic proposals to. I mean I think that he's just dead wrong about that.

EK: So we should, first step, talk to Iran, try to open up negotiations?

JE: Correct

EK: Do it, if necessary, bilaterally?

JE: Absolutely.

EK: OK, let me talk for a minute then ? we spoke last time, about the lessons of Iraq, and the one you told me was that we need to be much more skeptical of intelligence, even when there appears to be unity about what it ?

JE: Correct.

EK: Let's go a bit farther. What does Iraq say about the feasibility and the bar for invading countries in the Middle East?

JE: It means that we have to be much more careful. And even, you know, there seems to be some consensus about what Iran is doing, but we ought to be very critical when analyzing the information we're getting on Iran, too.

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EK: When you were at the Iowa town hall in Des Moines, I remember a young woman asking you about Israel, and you said to her, she asked you about Palestine more specifically, and you said, "You're not going to like my answer but you deserve one." Your answer was very pro-Israel in the conflict. Then you were at an AIPAC dinner the other night. You are, it seems, notably -- and I remember reading now your Iraq resolution -- where you said in the first line of it that they are a grave threat to us and our ally, Israel. You're notably pro-Israel, I think. What is -- two things -- what is your view on their treatment, or the way, or the interaction with them and the Palestinians, can anything be done there? More to the point, what is it, what are the experiences -- you were just in Israel you said -- that have brought you so much closer to that community and that way of thinking, and do you support AIPAC's line on these issues?

JE: Those are a lot of different questions, there are a lot of different questions? You're too smart, you ask too many questions at the same time?

JE: ... I've had some personal experiences in my interaction with Israel. I think that they're in a very difficult place, and they are subject to an awful lot of attacks, and there are countries around them that would like to see them destroyed. So, I think they live in a dangerous environment, I think that actually the 2002 road map was a pretty good road map, and the substantive elements of it were essentially correct. I think that there are -- I've been, I was in Israel just before Hizbullah, the fighting with the Israelis. I saw Hizbullah outposts in southern Lebanon, when I went to the border. I was in Jerusalem when the Sbarro Pizza bombing took place. Actually, let me be accurate...

JE: ... I was actually, I had left Jerusalem by the time the bombing happened, but I'd woke up there that morning and then I'd been gone just a few hours when that happened. So that felt personally, fairly close to me personally. And I think that it is very important for America to be engaged in this peace process. Because at the end of the day, what we should have is very difficult to achieve, I understand that -- it's certainly hard to achieve when Hamas is running the Palestinian Authority -- but there's so many things we could be doing, like humanitarian help, more serious humanitarian help for the Palestinian people that would help strengthen the capacity of a more moderate element within Palestine. So, what we want is two countries living side by side, two states living side by side, with security and in peace.

EK: But so let's talk, then, about AIPAC for a sec. This morning in the New York Post a story came out that last night Hillary Clinton was there, or was it two nights ago that you were both there?

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JE: It was last night.

EK: And she said they should be engaging with Iran and they sort of booed and hissed a little bit. I think a lot of people, and I'm one of them, when they read your comments to AIPAC, given where they are ?

JE: She's right about that, by the way.

EK: ... No, I know, you said that clearly earlier. I think a lot of folks read your comments to that audience, and to the Herzliya audience, as, given that you've said pretty explicitly that Israel cannot live with a nuclear Iran, and that keeping Iran from nuclear weapons is one of the gravest challenges of our time, that there is that line -- that you are drawing that line --that they can't have them. That if you take seriously what you've said about both Israel and the threat Iran poses to them --

JE: You know when you're president of the United States you carry an enormous responsibility --

EK: Sure.

JE: -- and there are consequences to what you do. And I just, I would never ever prejudge something that serious in advance. I don't think we're anywhere remotely close to having exhausted diplomatic avenues. I don't think we've done anything close to what we should be doing, and there are devastating consequences to a military strike. So, that's my judgment about where we are today and where we ought to proceed... One of the things, one of the realities, I think, of the responsibilities of the president, are that, is that, the criteria for ever using American force is pretty clear. You know when there's an imminent threat to America, or our allies, when we have a treaty obligation, or when there's some huge humanitarian crisis. But those are very broad, obviously, and so the kind of human being you have in the White House is enormously important -- I would argue more important than trying to have somebody predict, off in the future, what you'll do when confronted with it, because I think its unknowable. I think what's more important is to know that you have a good and decent human being who, who really wants to do the right thing and understands what the consequences are.

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EK: Let's talk then for one moment about the past ? Back to Iraq, if they had had weapons of mass destruction, if the intelligence had been correct, given what happened when we actually invaded, given the fact that it turned out that we could not elide the Sunni/Shia enmities, given all that, had the intelligence been correct, had the management been somewhat more competent, was the Iraq war an impossibility, should we never have gone in, or were we wrong to go in because we were wrongly informed? Was it morally wrong or was it --

JE: That's so complicated. I think that, can I rephrase slightly what you just said?

EK: Sure.

JE: If you were to tell me that they did have the weapons of mass -- it's just so hard to answer these hypothetical questions -- I believe that my vote was wrong, I take responsibility for that. But it was wrong for two reasons; it wasn't just wrong for one. It was wrong because, first, the basis for me voting for it was the weapons of mass destruction, and that was just false. But the second is, I felt a great conflict then about giving George Bush this authority, because I didn't trust him. And I resolved that conflict on the side of voting for it. Now seeing what's happened, I would not resolve that conflict that way. This president should not have been given the authority to go into Iraq and I think on both fronts -- that's the thing I can confidently say to you -- on both fronts the vote was wrong.

EK: But you can't confidently say that actually invading a country like Iraq for possessing active programs of WMDs would be the wrong thing to do?

JE: Ever? Ever?

EK: In the Iraq case, if they had possessed them, because, you know --

JE: Well but that's, see there's the problem -- we didn't exhaust the use of inspections. We didn't take the steps that needed to be taken to ensure that they in fact had weapons. There are multiple steps that weren't taken. We didn't engage the international community in a serious way. I mean I think that uh, with these kind of hypothetical questions, what I am

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confident saying is we should not have gone into Iraq, that my vote was wrong. And it wasn't just wrong because of the weapons of mass destruction; it was also wrong because of giving this president the authority.

Former Senator from North Carolina **John Edwards** was the Democratic candidate for vice president in 2004, and a candidate for president in 2008.

Ezra Klein is a writing fellow at The American Prospect. TAP intern Alina Hoffman transcribed this interview.

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