I've been asked to speak tonight about my experiences in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, but I begin by going back to the summer of 1787, when a small group of Americans gathered in Philadelphia in a constitutional convention. They had lived under a British king. They did not want there ever to be an American king. In retrospect, we can see that they were brilliantly successful: We have had 43 presidents and no kings. The product of their work was, of course, the American constitution. The part of it that we call the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments, is to me the most concise and eloquent statement ever written by human beings on the right of the individual to be free from oppression by government.

That’s one side of the coin of liberty. The other side is the need for everyone to have a fair chance to enjoy the blessings of liberty. To a man without a job, to a woman who can’t get good care or education for her child, to the young people who lack the skills needed to compete in a world of technology – they don’t think much about concepts like liberty or justice; they worry about coping day to day. The same is true of people living in a society torn by violence. Without civil order and physical security, freedom and individual liberty come to be seen as mere concepts, unrelated to the daily task of survival. So it was for many years in Northern Ireland. Violence and fear settled over that beautiful land like a heavy, unyielding fog. The conflict hurt the economy. Unemployment rose, with violence, in a deadly cycle of escalating fear and impoverishment.

Those words also describe life for many in the Middle East today.

After a half-century of discord and only occasional cooperation, the British and Irish governments concluded that, if there was to be any hope of bringing the bitter conflict in the north to an end, they would have to begin by cooperation between the governments. Despite much difficulty and over many setbacks, the governments persevered. After years of effort, they were able to get peace negotiations underway in the summer of 1996. The prime ministers invited me to serve as chairman. I had been involved in Northern Ireland long enough to realize what a daunting task it was.
The negotiations were the longest, most difficult I’ve ever been involved with. For most of the two years there was no progress. But somehow, we kept going. There was an especially bleak and dangerous time in the Christmas season of 1997 and the early months of 1998. There was a determined effort by men of violence on both sides to destroy the process. The negotiations seemed doomed as violence rose and the delegates were unable to focus on the subject of peace. In mid-February, on a flight from Dublin back to the United States, I began to devise a plan to establish an early deadline for an end to the talks. I was convinced that the absence of such a deadline guaranteed failure. The existence of a deadline couldn’t guarantee success, but it would make success possible.

It took me a month to put the plan together and to persuade all of the participants. But by late March they all agreed and were ready. I recommended a final deadline of Thursday, April 9, at midnight. The parties wanted an agreement, and so they agreed to the deadline. As we neared that deadline, after several intensive weeks of negotiation, we went around the clock. The prime ministers, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, came to Belfast, Northern Ireland, and showed true democratic leadership. There would not have been an agreement without their personal involvement. They didn’t just supervise the negotiations, they conducted them. Word by word, line by line, they put together a compromise that was able to attract support from a broad spectrum of political parties in Northern Ireland. President Clinton made an important contribution. He was very active in the process and was originally responsible for my presence in Northern Ireland.

On the last day and night, he stayed up around the clock telephoning several of the delegates, talking to the prime ministers and me. In a tight timeframe a powerful focus was brought to bear, and it produced the right result. But there was a warning right from the start. The very fact that getting an agreement took such an extraordinary effort was a signal of the difficulties that would follow in implementation of the agreement.

Finally, in the late afternoon of April 10, 1998, Good Friday, agreement was reached. It is important to recognize that, although historic, the agreement does not by itself guarantee or provide peace or political stability or reconciliation. It makes them possible. But there will be many years, many difficult decisions, many hard choices before those goals are achieved. I believe the agreement will endure because it’s fair, it’s balanced and it’s based on the principle that the future of Northern Ireland should be decided by the people of Northern Ireland.

In the past few months, I’ve been asked often to compare Northern Ireland and the Middle East. I begin with caution. Each human being is unique, as is each society. It follows logically that no two conflicts are exactly the same. Much as we would like it, there is no magic formula that, once discovered, can be used to end all conflicts. Also, my role in Northern Ireland was more extensive and took much longer than my role in the Middle East, so most of my comments will necessarily relate to that experience. But there are certain principles that I believe exist in both those situations and in fact are universal.

First, I believe that there is no such thing as a conflict that can’t be ended. They are created and sustained by human
beings; they can be ended by human beings. No matter how ancient the conflict, no matter how hateful, no matter how hurtful, peace can prevail. When I arrived in Northern Ireland I found to my dismay a widespread mood of pessimism among the public and the political leaders. It’s a small, well-informed society, so I became quickly well-known. Wherever I went, in a hotel lobby, on the street, in an airport, people would come up to me, introduce themselves, and they almost always said exactly the same thing. They began with nice words: “Thank you, Senator, we appreciate what you’re trying to do.” They always ended with despair: “You’re wasting your time. We’ve been killing each other for centuries and we’re doomed to go on killing each other forever.” As best I could, I worked to reverse such attitudes. That’s the special responsibility of political leaders, from whom many members of the public take their cue. Leaders must lead. One important way is to create an attitude of success, the belief that problems can be solved, that things can be better – not in a foolish, unrealistic way, but in a way that creates hope and confidence among the people.

Unfortunately, pessimism in the Middle East today mirrors that of Northern Ireland in 1995. Confidence in the peace process has been shattered. The culture of peace, so carefully nurtured over the past decade, has been replaced by widespread despair, even resignation. Among the many challenges faced by the leaders in that region is to persuade their people that there is a realistic path to peace, to justice and to security.

A second need is for a determined policy not to yield to violence. Over and over in Northern Ireland, those who opposed the peace process tried to destroy it through the use of violence, and they almost succeeded. There must be an endless supply of patience and perseverance. Seeking an end to conflict is not for the timid or the tentative. It takes courage, perseverance and steady nerves in the face of escalating violence. Those were the qualities of Anwar Sadat, a man who devoted his life, indeed, in a very real sense gave his life, to the cause of peace. Sadat had the courage to take the boldest of steps for peace, and he challenged others to rise with him.

Peace and political stability cannot be achieved in sharply divided societies or where there is historical conflict, unless there is a genuine willingness to understand the other point of view and to enter into principled compromise.
spond, as Anwar Sadat responded, if there is to be any hope for peace. I know it can be done, because I saw it first-hand in Northern Ireland. Men and women, some of whom had never before met, never before spoken, who had spent their entire adult lives in conflict, came together in an agreement for peace. Admittedly, it was long and difficult. Admittedly the result is not yet assured. But it did happen. And if it happened there, it can happen elsewhere.

A fourth principle is to recognize that implementation of peace agreements is as difficult, if not more so, and just as important, as reaching the agreement in the first place. That should be self-evident. But often just getting an agreement takes so long and is so difficult that there is a natural tendency to celebrate and then turn to other matters. But as we are now seeing in Northern Ireland, in the Middle East, in the Balkans, getting it done is often harder than agreeing to do it.

In the Middle East, the International Commission, which I chaired, recommended several steps to achieve an end to violence, the rebuilding of confidence, and the resumption of negotiations. Working with the director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, the parties are now trying to establish a process by which the recommendations of our committee can be implemented. We must all pray for their success. The people of Northern Ireland and of the Middle East deserve better than the troubles they’ve had for the past several decades. Peace and political stability are not too much to ask for. Indeed they are the minimal needs for a decent and caring society.

There’s a final point that to me is so important that it extends beyond conflict situations. I recall clearly my first day in Northern Ireland six years ago. I saw for the first time the huge wall that physically separates the communities in Belfast. Thirty feet high, topped in places with barbed wire, it is an ugly reminder of the intensity and duration of the conflict. Ironically, it’s called the Peace Line. On that first morning I met with a group of Catholics on their side of the wall, and in the afternoon with Protestants on their side of the wall. Their messages had not been coordinated, but they were essentially the same. In Belfast, and in other urban areas, they told me, there is a high correlation between unemployment and violence. They said that where men and women have no opportunity, have no hope, where they live in despair, they are more likely to take the path of violence.

As I sat and listened to them, I thought that I could just as easily be in any major American city, or other cities around the world, or in the Middle East. Despair is the fuel for instability and conflict everywhere. Hope and opportunity are essential to peace and stability. Men and women everywhere need income to support their families, and they need the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile and meaningful in their lives. The aspirations of parents are universal, whether it is a Palestinian mother or an Israeli father, or the parents of Catholic or Protestant children in Northern Ireland. Parents want their children healthy and happy and to get them off to a good start in life. The conflicts in Northern Ireland and the Middle East are obviously not exclusively or even primarily economic. They involve religion, national identity, competing territorial claims. But if there is to be a fair and lasting resolution of these conflicts, economic growth must play a central role.
I conclude on a personal note. I am not objective. I’m deeply biased in favor of the people of Northern Ireland, where I’ve spent six years, and in the Middle East, where I’ve spent six months. In both places they can be quarrelsome, quick to take offense; in both places they are warm and generous, energetic and productive, and they deserve better than what they’ve had. There are going to be many setbacks along the way, but I remain hopeful because I know in Northern Ireland that the people are sick of war. They’re sick of so many funerals, especially those involving the small white coffins of children, prematurely laid into the rolling green fields of that beautiful countryside. The people in Northern Ireland want peace, and I hope they can keep it. And I believe that the vast majority of people in the Middle East also want peace, and I hope that they can achieve it.

When the Good Friday Agreement was reached, at about six o’clock on the evening of Good Friday in 1998, we had been in negotiations for nearly two years and continuously for the last two days and nights. Everyone who had been involved in the negotiations was elated and exhausted. We had a last meeting, and in my parting comments I told the delegates that for me the agreement was the realization of a dream that had sustained me through the most difficult years of my life. Now, I said, I have a new dream, and it is this. I dream that I will return to Northern Ireland in a few years with my young son. We will roam the country, taking in the sights and sounds of that beautiful land. Then on a rainy afternoon, of which there are many in Northern Ireland, we will drive to the capital and we’ll sit quietly in the visitors gallery of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the democratic government created as a result of this peace agreement. There we will watch and listen as the members of that assembly debate the ordinary issues of life in a democratic society – education, healthcare, tourism, agriculture. There will be no talk of war, for the war will have long been over. There will be no talk of peace, for peace will be taken for granted. Isn’t that a beautiful dream for Northern Ireland and for the Middle East? When that happens, I will be truly and finally fulfilled.

Q&A

Q: Your commission proposed a freeze on all construction at what are called Jewish settlements or Israeli settlements. Are you suggesting that the Israelis have no right to be there? And does it apply to Jerusalem? If “provocative” is the trigger, where does it end? Israel’s very existence is considered provocative by a lot of people.

SEN. MITCHELL: With respect to the last part of your question, that argument could be made, has been and is being made against any step taken by anybody in any peace process. Therefore I don’t treat it seriously. However, I do treat seriously the question regarding the settlements. It is a serious issue, an extremely controversial one, and a very difficult one for all concerned. First, let’s be clear. The United States and Israel have a very strong and close relationship. I believe in that strong relationship. I served for 15 years as a member of the U.S. Senate, and I supported that policy and continue to believe it to be the correct policy. However, even in the best of relationships there are differences of view. These are two democracies, sovereign states, and it is unrealistic, indeed unhealthy, to expect that they will
agree on every single issue. And one issue on which there has been consistent disagreement has been settlements. Every American administration, for more than a quarter century, has publicly opposed the policies and actions of the government of Israel with respect to settlements. In our report we cited specific statements by prior presidents and administrations to that effect. We quoted President Reagan’s statement of 20 years ago to the effect that the most important thing to be done to build confidence was a freeze on settlements. Although circumstances have much changed since President Reagan made that statement, that principle remains valid.

Second, it is not a new policy for consideration by the government of Israel. Prime Minister Menachem Begin froze settlements during the Camp David process. Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin froze settlements during his tenure in office. It has been widely debated within Israel and there are strongly held views on both sides, as befits a democratic society, where it is openly and vigorously debated. So we felt that it was appropriate to make that recommendation.

The recommendation has also been mischaracterized by some who have criticized our report. It has been suggested, for example, that we established a moral equivalence between settlement activity and what we describe in our report as terrorist actions. There is no such equivalence in our report. Secondly, we propose a sequence of steps beginning, as the parties have now begun, with an immediate and unconditional cessation of violence and a resumption of security cooperation, to be followed by a series of confidence-building measures by both sides, one of which is a freeze on settlements, others of which involve serious and difficult actions for both sides and then a resumption of negotiations.

We also made very clear that, although these actions should occur in sequence and that first must come a cessation of violence, there cannot be a sustained cessation of violence unless it is followed by other actions. That is simply stating what everyone in the Middle East knows; it is obvious. Everyone should understand that, although these occur in sequence, they must all occur, because it is simply not realistic to expect that there will be a cessation of violence, a resumption of security cooperation, and then nothing else. So there is going to be a difficult period within which the parties will now work, with the timely and, I believe, valuable assistance of the United States, currently in the form of [CIA Director] George Tenet. They must work out the timing and sequence of reciprocal measures to rebuild the confidence that has been so badly shattered. We were quite clear in our report: The timing and sequence of those steps are absolutely critical, and they can be decided only by the parties themselves. That’s what they are now in the process of doing, and we pray for their success.

It is not so much whether or not it is our recommendations or some other initiative that forms the basis for coming together. What is important is that they take the steps necessary, because, as both leaders told me in my last meeting with them before we issued our report, “Life has become unbearable for the members of our society,” as indeed it has for both. We said in our report, and I believe with all of my heart and soul, that death and destruction will not solve the problems of the Middle East. There is only one path to peace and justice and security and that is
through negotiations. There are some Palestinians who express the view that Israel cannot exist and must be driven into the sea. And there are some Israelis who hold the view that the Palestinians must be, in their delicate word, “transferred” to someplace else, that they have no right to be there. Both are dangerous fantasies. They will not happen. History and geography have made clear that there is a shared destiny, and that they will live side by side in conflict or in peace. We hope that our report will make a contribution, however small, to their choosing the path of peace.

Q: The Palestinian Authority states that the Israeli occupation for the past 34 years is the root cause of all the violence and that they adhere to taking your recommendations as a total package, whereas it appears from the Israelis’ perspective that they want to pick and choose the recommendations rather than implementing them as a total package. Isn’t that impeding the peace process?

SEN. MITCHELL: When our committee met for the first time in November of last year, we made several decisions on how we would proceed. One of them was that we would resist the invitation to comment on each day’s events and to attempt to act as judges over the actions that people were engaging in. We determined that we would adhere to our mandate and we would try to be constructive. So I have not, during the six months of the process nor since we issued our report, offered commentary on the events that were occurring at the time. Our report speaks for itself. We made certain recommendations. We believe they should be implemented. What is occurring now is a disagreement over the timing and sequence and full implementation of all the provisions of the recommendations. We made the recommendations that we think the parties should act on, but we stated explicitly in our report that their adoption and timing must be determined by the parties themselves. That’s the process that’s now underway, with facilitation by the United States, and I hope that it is successful.

Q: Given the fragility of Prime Minister Sharon’s coalition government, do you think he can make the tough decisions and concessions that will be necessary to satisfy Palestinians, and do you think Yasser Arafat has the leadership stature to take less than 100 percent of what he wants?

SEN. MITCHELL: There is never a perfect time. There never has been, in all of history, a perfect leader. There have been great leaders. But men and women are required to take difficult actions in less than ideal circumstances, and history has seen many examples of how people have risen to the challenge, have not been prisoners of their past, and have been able to take bold and courageous action to bring about the desired result, particularly in the pursuit of peace. Of course we have discussed tonight one such leader in Anwar Sadat. Can the leaders in the Middle East do that now? I believe they can, and I hope they can, because the alternative is so unacceptable. The most dangerous thing is that each public mistrusts the other. People of goodwill in Israel, who thought they had a partner in the pursuit of peace throughout the Oslo process, now don’t believe that they have. Palestinians of goodwill, who thought that they had partners who would accept the existence of an independent, contiguous and viable Palestinian state on the West Bank of the Jordan, now don’t
believe that to be the case. There has been a corrosive loss of trust in both societies. That’s why it’s so incumbent on us to say and do nothing that would make an already difficult task even more difficult.

**Q:** The Mitchell Report has become a bit of a Bible for how to move forward in the Middle East. Were you surprised by how the international community has seized your committee’s recommendations, and are you worried that, if the violence continues, you’ll be blamed for it?

**SEN. MITCHELL:** One of the other reasons I was able to be helpful in Northern Ireland was that I correctly perceived that part of my role was to help deflect criticism away from the participants, who were active elected officials, and absorb some if it myself. So if, in the end, the process succeeds, I know all the members of the committee will be deeply gratified. If it fails and we are criticized, then it was worth the effort. One of the things we did, at the invitation of the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, was to meet with the families of victims. It was indescribably moving. Each side chose the most sympathetic of victims to present to us, and it was impossible not to be moved by the sadness and grief. So many lives unnecessarily lost, so many futures stunted, so much discord and upheaval that anyone who has the chance to be of assistance must do so.

Our report has been well received. It has been endorsed by most of the governments in the world. Both the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority have expressed general support for it, though there have been reservations on some of the particular points. All of us were pleasantly surprised at the reception. We hope and pray that it will have some beneficial effect.

**Q:** When you have two parties that appear to be irreconcilably opposed, do you seek to press each one to find the limit of their flexibility and accommodation and try to craft an accord based upon what is politically possible, or do you try to appeal to some kind of principle such as historical justification or self-rule and convince the other party to conform to that principle?

**SEN. MITCHELL:** One of the principles I had was simply to apply the golden rule: treat everybody with respect and courtesy, and give everybody the fullest opportunity to express their views. I said to the delegates on the first day, we may never get an agreement, but not one of you will ever be able to say you didn’t have a chance to make your case. I don’t care how long it takes, I’ll sit here and listen to whatever anyone has to say. Privately both sides would come to me and say, you’ve got to cut those guys off, they’re going on too long. I told them all, I’m not cutting...

If you probe in a polite and respectful way, you can elicit from people an understanding of what it is that motivates them. Almost everything that we believe on first impression to be an irrational act, in the mind of the actor is not irrational at the time it occurs.
anybody off. I sat there for thousands of hours. I would listen for as long as anybody wanted to speak. Over time there began to emerge common words, common themes, common ground. If you probe in a polite and respectful way, you can elicit from people an understanding of what it is that motivates them. Almost everything that we believe on first impression to be an irrational act, in the mind of the actor is not irrational at the time it occurs. You must try very hard to get into their minds and understand what it is, and not have a prior prejudice that says, that’s so awful I’m not going to really listen to it. The aspirations of people everywhere are the same. They want to be treated with respect and dignity. They want to have hope and opportunity in their lives, and, most important, they want their children to have a good life. I referred earlier to the meetings with the victims’ families. It was painful to listen to the grief of people who suffered unbearable sorrow in circumstances that are very difficult to understand. But you have to try to get inside their minds, and you have to try to get into the mind of the person who committed the act. That is the manner in which I approached it. Try to get them to agree on their common humanity and the universality of aspirations and hopes.

Q: The United States supported Israel in bringing to the Middle East 40,000 people who have been trained in the practice of terrorism for 40 to 50 years. They’ve also participated in arms smuggling, in drug smuggling, and many of them have American blood on their hands. Was it realistic for us to expect that people that have practiced terrorism for so many years could come and be leaders for peace in the Middle East?

SEN. MITCHELL: There has been some criticism of our report by those who hoped that we would conduct a review and analysis of the Camp David process and render a judgment on what happened there, with a specific condemnation following from that judgment. However, we were specifically instructed, in writing by the president, to confine ourselves to the events that began in late September of last year. We were directed not to determine the guilt or innocence of any person or institution, nor to assign blame for any action. We honored the mandate. The question you raised is a very important one and will be answered by historians, by the participants and perhaps by another committee of some kind. But it was not answered by this committee because we were expressly told we were not to answer it. I want to make clear that the parties agreed to the creation of this committee. The Sharm el-Sheikh statement, which called for the creation of the committee, was the product of a summit meeting that included the government of Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the United States, Egypt, Jordan, the United Nations and the European Union.

With respect to the other question, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, there were those who said he was a terrorist who could not lead people in any action other than terror. In Northern Ireland I was asked that question almost every day: Could those who had engaged in violence in the past now be trusted to participate in democratic government? And of course, in the Palestinian territories I heard precisely that argument made by Palestinians with reference to prior Israeli prime ministers. Only time and history will tell. But here is the reality: Palestinians
have chosen a leadership. Whatever one may think of that leadership, it is their leadership with whom negotiations must occur. Otherwise there is simply no prospect of ever trying to reach some kind of a negotiated settlement. I want to emphasize the very strong part of our report that specifically and categorically condemns the use of terrorism. It could not be more clear. In Northern Ireland, when the negotiations began, they were based upon what became known as the Mitchell principles, which are principles of commitment to democracy and non-violence. I believe strongly that in these circumstances there can be no meaningful negotiation in an atmosphere of violence. I urge the condemnation of violence and support the use of exclusively democratic and peaceful means. But it is not for me, in my role, to judge who any group of people should select as their representatives. It falls upon me, in my role, to deal with those who are there by virtue of the fact that they are the chosen representatives of their people. Whatever my personal views or inclinations are, that’s the reality that has to be dealt with. There’s no perfect time and there are no perfect leaders. You have to deal with the situation that exists. There is an established leadership of the Palestinian Authority. It must be dealt with. I think the Israeli government recognizes and acknowledges that. What we have to do now is to find a way to peaceful, democratic dialogue to end the violence, rebuild confidence, resume negotiations and reach peace, justice and security for the people in that region.