

International Affairs Forum Interview:

May 14th, 2004

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**Special thanks to Ms. Stephanie Barret from the United Nations who contributed to this report*



Former United States Senator Don Riegle Jr.

Senator Don Riegle from Michigan served in Congress as both a Republican and a Democrat. He served on the Finance, Commerce, Budget, Banking, International Relations Committee, and Foreign Operations Subcommittee.

International Affairs Forum: Sen. Riegle, in January this year you endorsed Sen. Kerry for President. In your opinion, what are the characteristics that will make Sen. Kerry a better president than George W. Bush?

Mr. Don Riegle Jr.: John Kerry has had a lifetime of public service. He served his country in Vietnam, he was a public prosecutor, lieutenant governor of his state, and United States Senator for a great number of years. I have had the chance to see the quality of his mind and work. He is more experienced than George W. Bush. This is especially important today because we have a war to bring to a conclusion. He brings the knowledge, experience and sensitivity that the country needs right now. I don't think we have that with Bush.

Today we have a president who is a substandard president. I know his father very well and I have admiration for his father. His father was equipped to be president and was a good

president. I did not like everything he did but the same is true with Clinton. George W. Bush was not prepared to be president. He lacks the experience, training, and he is falling short in the job. I do not like saying this because it hurts the country, but I think that is the objective case. If you look at it in the terms of economic policy, he had to fire his first economic team. What does that say? The war policy in Iraq has also not worked. I give this president a failing grade, but in some respects, we did not have a reason to expect a lot more from this president because he came with such a thin portfolio. Being a Governor of Texas for a short period of time is no preparation to be the President of the United States. We are now living the effects of that. I expect his popularity to continue to go down because his policies are not well designed and are not working well.

IA-F: Recent polls suggest that many people are not familiar with John Kerry's political and economic platform. What is in your opinion the reason for

this?

Mr. Riegle: Kerry is still too new on the scene. I don't think he has presented himself very effectively to the broad public yet. In addition, Bush people are very skillful in spending what is said to be 90 million dollars in creating a very negative perception of Kerry. This negative perception has been pushed in the minds of people and Kerry has to overcome that. Kerry has two tasks. He has to overcome the negative attacks, which is difficult to do, and present himself in a positive image. I know from my own experience, there is a lot of money spent attacking you and you don't want to deal with it, but you just have to deal with it. If you don't start answering to these attacks, people start thinking it's true. So if the other guy is spending 90 million dollars to say you are a bum, you have to find a way to top that. You have to be clever. John F. Kennedy had a charm and attractiveness and that was a great asset and drew a favorable interest from people. Kerry hasn't quite gotten there yet. It remains to be seen if he can get there, and there are two ways to get there. One way is by being sufficiently interesting so people start gravitating toward you. The other is that his opponent will sink so far down that at the end the people say "I'll take him to get rid of the bum I have right now".

IA-F: How do you view the current U.S. job market and how can the U.S. deal with outsourcing?

Mr. Riegle: That is a wonderfully complex question. Globally, we are involved in huge transforming economic events like the development of China and industrialization of India. There are huge factors at work on global bases that are completely rearranging the

global economic picture. The United States is affected in many different ways. Recently, in the NY Times there was a very interesting piece about the areas where hiring is going on, and the areas of job loss. Manual work jobs are shrinking all the time. Many people in the US use to make a living through manual work and these types of jobs are moving off-shores. The job expansion is where there is more creativity involved. If the United States in this global economy is going to preserve its living standard, then more people have to move in this direction. This is very complex because the country has to gear up its system for that. As we go through these transitions, it can be extremely difficult. People can lose their jobs and their healthcare. Many people are at a point of their life when they cannot easily transition in the job market.

IA-F: Do you believe that the poor job market issue will have a significant impact on the upcoming election?

Mr. Riegle: It should. Part of the question is can our leaders define these problems intelligently. It is hard to decide what the best answer may be, but if we are not even recognizing and defining the right problem, then we are not going to be able to find the answer. We are focused in the wrong direction. I think Bush is off on the wrong track. From the recent polling, I have seen many people believe that we are on the wrong track because of what they see in Iraq and the economy. If this is so, then the question is "what would be the right track?" What do we need to do to change so that people start to see that we have shifted direction and are moving on a more positive track?

IA-F: What is your opinion on the

current situation in Iraq?

Mr. Riegle: I think we have a tragedy taking place in Iraq in many dimensions. It is very hard to express it in a single phrase or sentence because there are so many moving parts. On the one hand, it is well that Saddam Hussein is not in power. On the other hand, we are a very long way from having an orderly civil society that is safe for people. It is going to be extremely difficult to get there. It is a practical matter and it is going to be very expensive. It is not clear to me where the money is going to come from. I don't think that the United States, with all its other difficulties like the trade deficit and the budget deficit is going to be able to feed an endless supply of money to Iraq. The issues in Iraq go back hundreds of years. It is one of the earliest civilizations that we know of. The religious and sectarian conflicts have been there for a long time and will continue to be there. I don't think that the US or any outside party can come in and solve those differences. Certainly not in a short period of time. The notion that any outside power can suddenly referee and say "this is the way it is going to be in Iraq" is impractical and unachievable. This notion that we can mandate a US outcome in Iraq is one of the biggest mistakes of this administration, but there has also been a succession of mistakes. The administration misdiagnosed the problems in the first place, and we did not get international support. We decided to go in alone, and this was a reckless policy. The recent prison abuse scandal is just another mistake in the succession of mistakes and miscalculations by the administration.

Many Americans were killed in Iraq because we went in with a bad plan and

without proper training and protection. The death toll is over 800 but we also had around 17000 medical evacuations for injuries. Many of our young people will never be the same again. The wounded veterans come back home and our government frankly has a very short memory concerning veterans. Once somebody leaves the service as a wounded veteran, the government really does not want to do much with him/her. We say we do, but very often we do not respond to their needs. This is what bothers me the most.

IA-F: Does the government see veterans as a financial burden?

Mr. Riegle: Yes. The government sees the veterans as a financial burden. The Defense Department is always looking forward for the next war. They do not want to spend money and time thinking about the last war. Many people at the Defense Department are anxious for the next war to happen because that is what they are there for, to fight a war. It seems odd to say that, but that tends to happen. We are seeing some of that right now in Iraq. There seems to be very little appreciation for the human sacrifice of our young people. The fact that our government is not willing to permit photographs to be taken of the coffins of our fallen heroes, to me, is an example of not being honest about the human cost of the war. Why did they not allow pictures of the coffins? Is it because they did not want to have it blemish the notion of success of the effort in Iraq? That is inexcusable. That is not what democracy is about.

IA-F: You served 28 years in the U.S. Congress as both Republican and Democrat. What contributed to your decision to change party affiliation?

Mr. Riegle: I spent my first six years as a Republican, but then I got deeply involved to try to stop the Vietnam War because I believed that it was a strategic mistake for the United States to be engaged in that war the way we were. I thought we needed to conclude the war, so I tried very hard to do that from a policy point of view.

This was a difficult time for me. I was trying to figure out what to do about it. I decided that I could no longer comfortably remain in the Republican Party given the views that I held, and the predominant views in the Republican Party coming down from the top. So I felt that my only practical alternative was to enter the Democratic Party. Then, of course you have to start over, in terms of building political relationships. It is a completely new experience to become a functioning member of one party, having started as a functioning member of another party.

It seems to me that the current war policy in Iraq would rise to the same level and feels like the Vietnam War policy. Even though the case facts are different, enough things are similar. We are sending people to die every day and we are killing other people every day. For the first time since retiring from the Congress, I wish I were back in Congress so I could speak out against the Iraq war policy.

IA-F: Do you have any advice or message for our readers, particularly for

students and young professionals entering the field of politics and international relations?

Mr. Riegle: I do. Young people will inherit the future. Young people have an enormous stake on what is happening now. On the various policy issues, students and young professionals should be well informed, draw opinions, register, vote, and actively support candidates. If they like Bush, they should work hard to get him reelected. If they do not like him and think he is on the wrong course, they should work hard to get Kerry elected. This also applies to electing governors, senators and house members. Young people globally, not only in the U.S., should think about careers in public service. People who work at the White House and the Defense Department have tremendous leverage on what is happening right now. Paul Wolfowitz, who I think should be replaced, was not elected by anybody but has a tremendous amount of power in the Defense Department. If in several years you get that job, you will be in the position to exercise great power. There are many roles to play. We do have a self-government system, so if the best people do not come forward and take up these positions in the government, the government will rise or fall based on who is there.