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Remarks by Aspen Institute President and CEO Walter Isaacson at ATFP Third Annual Gala

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Thank you very much George and thank you for all you've done. We certainly couldn't have succeeded with the Middle East Strategy Group without people like you who knew what you were doing and actually worked and got it done.

When Dr. Asali so kindly flattered me by asking me to speak tonight I asked him what he wanted me to speak on. And he said "Well combine discussing your new assignment that Dr. Rice has asked you to do with a discussion of Benjamin Franklin and the founding of the United States and how that relates to the founding of Palestine." And he said "And do it in less than twelve minutes because we have Nick Burns speaking and people would rather hear him than you."

I also know if I keep Undersecretary Burns away for too long Condi won't be able to get this meeting scheduled in November or December so I plan to try to wrap it all together by speaking almost as quickly as Ziad thinks.

It's very easy for me to connect the various dots that Ziad mentioned because what Dr. Rice has asked us to do, working with the Middle East Strategy Group and The Aspen Institute is to help develop the economic and educational partnerships that can lead to a greater stability and economic opportunities in Palestine.

We're on the verge, we all hope, of the creation and birth of a new state, the state of Palestine, and we want it to have economic opportunities and the great education that it deserves. And in doing so we do follow the mantra of Dr. Franklin, because Benjamin Franklin, when he was here founding this country, he insisted that a democracy and a freedom loving country can only exist where there are economic opportunities and great educational systems.

He dedicated himself to that ever since age seventeen. He became a runaway, a runaway from a theocracy, which was Puritan Boston to the city of Philadelphia where there were Muslims and Jews and Presbyterians and Anglicans and even a few Quakers and it had to all work together in a spirit of brotherly love. [Applause]

I guess we have a Philadelphia table here.

And in doing so he formed a group, which he called the Leather Apron Club because he knew that America could only work if it had a middle class, what he called "we the middling people."

And the Leather Aprons to him were the people who owned shops, the people who were artisans and tradesmen, the people who got up early every morning, put on the leather apron and opened up their store.

And that Leather Apron Club met every Friday to talk about the virtues and values you needed for a good society and famously he made a list, which you can see in the autobiography of all the virtues and values.

From industry, and honesty and frugality, and being a real geek he put them all in a list and he used to mark how well he did. When he finally got a perfect scorecard he showed it around to the members of his club and one of them kindly informed Ben Franklin that he was forgetting a virtue he might want to practice, and Franklin said "What's that?" and the friend said "Humility. You might try that one." And Franklin's line, which I've always loved in the notion of forming a good society, was "I was never very good at the virtue of humility, I could never

master it. But I was very good at the pretense of humility; I could fake it very well. And I learned that the pretense of humility was just as useful as the reality of it because it made you listen to the person next to you and have tolerance and find the common ground you needed in order to form a good civil society."

And so he and his Leather Apron Club start forming economic, development, and educational institutions and they do it through public private partnerships, which is what Secretary Rice, Karen Hughes, Ruben Jeffries, and others have asked us to do.

He did it by forming an academy for the education of the youth in Pennsylvania, which is now the University of Pennsylvania.

He did it by creating the first hospital, by creating a loan fund for young apprentices that's very similar to the Middle East Investment Initiative that Berl Bernhard and others are now running.

And all of these institutions had one simple goal: public/private partnerships to work together for the common good.

His mother, who was still a Puritan back in Boston, made fun of him by saying "You can't buy your way into heaven by good deeds on this Earth." And he wrote a wonderful letter back saying "The only thing I know about the various religions in this world is that they all believe in a creator who created all the men and women in this world so he must love them all dearly and love them all equally. And thus I'd rather have it said of me that I helped my fellow man than that I got into disputes about the dogmas of different religions."

What we hope to do, and what I hope our team can do, is work in three different baskets of creating economic and educational opportunities in Palestine.

The first thing we're going to do is, we hope, create new community centers with the help of USAID and there are many people here from there, including Henrietta Holsman Fore was here this evening.

We're going to build these community centers and we're going to enlist, as we already have, people from Intel, Microsoft and other companies to help have technology training, to help have language training, to help have all sorts of opportunities that can be done in the five major cities of Palestine with these community centers and youth academies almost modeled on the Academy for the Education of Youth that Benjamin Franklin did.

Secondly we're going to try to create outgrowths of the Middle East Investment Initiative, including other loan guarantee funds, mortgage-backed funds, housing funds with the proper risk insurance, the various things people have talked about.

Thirdly, we are going to try to start up some businesses that are partnerships between American and Palestinian business leaders, hopefully with Israeli business leaders too, including a call center in Ramallah that can serve as the call center for a lot of corporations around the world. For people who need to have a call center for the Arabic speaking world.

We also hope to have textile factories; we also hope to have housing facilities and other partnerships that American and Palestinian businesses can work together on.

And finally we also hope to have an economic development conference, a development conference in which business leaders from the United States and from around the world will

come to Bethlehem sometime in March and build relationships, including new investment in the Palestinian territories.

You've already been introduced to Berl Bernhard who's working on it. I want to mention Toni Verstandig over there our Executive Director of this who's going to actually be doing the heavy lifting with us. Our Vice-Chairman, you know as well as I do, Samer Khoury, who I saw sitting around there. Thank you very much Samer.

The people at OPIC have been particularly good, we have to give OPIC the credit along with a lot of other people for coming up with the Middle East Investment Fund and I saw Robert Drumheller and others from OPIC here, they're going to be part of the process and I look forward to working with them.

Ambassador Margaret Scobey is the person keeping us in line with the State Department, since she actually knows what she's doing and I think Secretary Rice was a little bit worried if we went off on our own so she has Margaret, I saw Margaret in a beautiful blue dress so she's somewhere here.

And Andrea McDaniel who works for Karen Hughes is also here. And so that's part of our team.

If we can be successful I hope that when Nick Burns and Secretary Rice and the others are able to work on the political issues we will have done what Dr. Franklin wanted us to do and that would be to create the framework of stakeholders who are going to be in favor of peace and in favor of stability.

When Dr. Franklin was very old they call him back from his envoy's work to Philadelphia because they're having the First Continental Congress and they have to write a declaration to explain why America has gone to war. And it was probably the last time Congress ever appointed a good committee, but it had Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams on it.

And they write a beautiful declaration and those of us who are recovering journalists and editors like to look at the editing of that document. And if you go to the first draft that Thomas Jefferson wrote you see that beautiful second paragraph that he began by saying "We hold these truths to be sacred," and then you see Benjamin Franklin's printer's pen crossing it out and he writes, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." And then the sentence goes on and says they're endowed with certain inalienable rights, and there's John Adams handwriting: "Endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights."

And just as they balance one half of one sentence with their editing you can see how they balance the role of religion in our lives but also the role of rationality, reason, and the consent of the governed in doing our rights. It was a delicate balance they did then and it's a delicate balance we do now.

It happened again with our Constitutional Convention, when Benjamin Franklin is pushing 80, he's by far the oldest member of that Convention but they're tearing themselves apart on all sorts of issues. And he says to them "I'm older than everybody else here, but the older I Get something very strange happens to me, I realize I'm wrong at times. And I need to at least have humility, (or as he put it the pretense of humility) and think the person next to me may be right. And it's going to happen to all of you when you get older so maybe you too should have

the tolerance and humility to think that you can find common ground with other people."

He said, "When we were young tradesmen and we were trying to put together a joint that didn't quite fit we'd take a little from one side and a little from the other to get a joint that would hold together for centuries. And so too, we here at this Convention, must each part with some of our demands." And his point, as he made it, was compromisers may not make great heroes but they do make great democracies. And that's what we're all trying to do I hope in this era, as we try to make a new great democracy of Palestine.

During his lifetime he donated to the building fund of each and every church that was built in Philadelphia, and at one point they were building a new hall for itinerant preachers. If you go to Philadelphia and you look at Independence Hall and you look to your left it's still called The New Hall, and he wrote the fundraising document, and that document starts with a wonderful line that says "Even if the mufti of Constantinople were to send somebody here to preach Islam to us and to teach us about Mohammed we should offer a pulpit and we should listen, for we might learn."

On his deathbed he was also the largest individual contributor to the Mikveh Israel Synagogue, the first synagogue built in Philadelphia. And so when he died, instead of his minister accompanying him to the grave, for the first time all 35 ministers, preachers, and priests of Philadelphia, the rabbi of the Jews and the leaders of all the other religions linked arms and marched with him to the grave.

That's what they were fighting for when they founded this country and that's what we're all fighting for now as we found the new nation of Palestine.

Thank you all very much.

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