

This speech by Congressman Bob Ney (R-Ohio) was given in June 2001 at an AIC Congressional Roundtable. Inaugurated in July 2000, the Congressional Roundtables were held in Washington, DC and attended by members of Congress, diplomats, policy and legal experts, academics, and journalists. Their goal was to facilitate interaction and exchange of ideas on subjects and issues that are of mutual concern and interest to the United States and Iran.

“What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate:” The Need for Government-to-Government Contact Between the US and Iran

Bob Ney

The ILSA vote doesn't look very promising, but that doesn't mean the struggle should stop on this entire issue. It is a matter of education and re-education and people getting together and forming a citizen's lobby to make sure that members of Congress and their offices are educated on this issue.

I have argued with colleagues who constantly say that we've got to have a most favored national status for China, we have to deal with the Chinese, we can't close the borders. China is a Communist government. They imprison bishops of the Christian faith. They have committed numerous human rights violations, and yet we continue to speak to them. And by the way, I think we should. That is how we, in fact, communicate.

However, when it comes to Iran, that's a different ballgame. They have a freely elected president and a parliament, but we don't talk with them. So, I think we have a skewed foreign policy at best. Other countries also tell us that we can't communicate with Iran. I've lived twice overseas, I've been to over 60 countries, and I believe this is a small world and we have to communicate and reach out to many people.

I believe we, as the government of the United States, have to stand up for human rights. We have to make sure that our own house is in order here on human rights, but also make sure that we carry the message around the planet that we want to stand up for decency and people's rights. However, I'm a member of the United States government. I serve this country and no other.

So, therefore, if another country does not like Iran, it doesn't mean that we don't talk to Iran. I'm very tired of hearing Iran doesn't get along with this country or that country. We know that. We don't particularly get along with Iran. But I don't want to hear from other countries dictating our policy of who we deal with. We must base our relationship with Iran on what we, the United States, think of Iran, not on how Iran gets along with another country.

My argument is, if other countries have problems with Iran, or if Iran doesn't treat minorities in the right way, the way to change that behavior is to communicate with Iran.

ILSA is going to have a vote and it is going to be very difficult, but we need to continue to communicate. I heard a question asked of Senator Hagel, "What do the constituents want?" My constituents say it is ridiculous that we don't talk to Castro; in fact by not talking to Castro we have kept him in power for 41 years. My constituents say no one died in the American Embassy. We have people who were hostages there, and they say to communicate, so who are we to say not to? So, my constituency feels that if it helps to change behavior, help minorities in Iran who are not treated in the proper way, that communicating with them is better than not communicating with them. That is what I hear from my constituency.

My constituency is Eastern Ohio, where we're not necessarily involved with world affairs. In fact we've been damaged severely from foreign steel dump from Brazil and China and other countries. But our people are of an open mind to say that if it helps with peace, if it helps to change behaviors, then we ought to communicate; nothing is wrong with it. I don't think we have to fear saying the word "Iran" back in our districts. Just because you support communicating with another country doesn't mean that you support all that that country does. My bottom line is that we need to communicate.

Now, at the other end of the spectrum, Iran needs to talk to us. They need to communicate. Government-to-government dialogue is great. Speaking between civilizations is tremendous. Cultural exchange is correct. Tourism is good. It needs to be face-to-face, government-to-government contact between members of Congress and whatever level of government is willing to communicate with us.

We should go to Tehran. They – and by that I mean whoever is willing to communicate or be an emissary on behalf of a wide diversity in Iranian government – should come here to the Capitol. I openly invite anyone today. I'll hop the first plane if I get a visa to Tehran. I can take colleagues of mine from both sides of the aisle, Democrats, Republicans, we've talked about it. Let's meet in a third country and Iran can pick the country where we will meet.

Just as I've said that we ought to have an attitude change here, they also need to have an attitude change from the Iranian side. We need to have face-to-face contact. It is the only way it is going to begin. For us to sit down, not detail out everything since 1979 that we're unhappy with, just sit down, communicate, have lunch. Have some nice poulo [cooked rice] and then we can get into issues, their issues and our issues.

So that is my perspective on it. It has to begin to happen. And then I think you'll see behavioral changes or ideas that are put forth. But I do challenge Iran to join with us in communication and some hospitality. Somebody from the government of Iran that I bumped into in New York said to me, you know, if you could just get this message that sanctions were undone – I said that's difficult because when I go to my colleagues, they turn to me and say, well, they won't sit down with you, will they? Have you sat down with them?

And that is the point I made to the individual from the Iranian government; it is hard for me to go to my colleagues and say, let's forget this vote. Because I can't say, let's not have this vote because we are sitting down, we have met in Sweden, or in Italy, and it's beginning to change; I can't say that to my colleagues, so it is hard for me to grow a vote. This is what we did in China; everything was against China, Nixon went to China, and boom! It opened up, and pretty soon the President said to Congress, "Don't take all of these adversarial moves against China, we're talking."

I cannot go to the members that I serve with today and say we're talking, because we aren't officially talking. Iran has to stop the rhetoric, sit down and begin to talk. I'm not criticizing Iran and I'm not criticizing us, but this government-to-government communication really has to happen.

And again I say, all levels of government, it is not ours to sit and judge who in fact we're communicating with; if they're willing to talk we're willing to talk with them. I can tell you today that I have Democrats and Republicans who have committed to me, willing at any point in time to have anyone over here who wants to talk. We will go over there or meet in a third party country.