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**Conference Summary**  
**Jon Sawyer**

Jon Sawyer, Director  
Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting  
Suite 615  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
Tel: 202-797-5285  
Email: [jsawyer@pulitzercenter.org](mailto:jsawyer@pulitzercenter.org)  
Website: <http://pulitzercenter.org>

The charge of this year's conference was among the most daunting we've had: "How should the United States deal with the rest of the world? How should the world deal with the United States?" If only we knew! We had a great array of speakers tackling this issue from diverse perspectives, yet as the weekend progressed I found myself thinking that our real topic was the myriad ways in which we talk past each other, both as individuals and as nations, and in the process how too often we lose sight of our own shortcomings – and of our common interests with the rest of the world.

We tackled this in all kinds of ways – Gen. John Vessey's eloquent call for a military-political policy that focuses on conflict prevention; Crystal Williams' indispensable guide to the current debate raging over immigration; the Caribbean perspective of Ambassador Erasmo Lara-Pena, permanent representative of the Dominican Republic at the United Nations; Patrick Inman's presentation on the politics of identity; and Marilyn Booth's discussion of reading Arabic literature in the shadow of the Iraq war.

As usual our conference chair, Klaus Becker, came up with the perfect story to capture the ways in which we misunderstand each other, and ourselves – his tale of Henry, the fellow worried that his wife Millie was losing her hearing, and the most tactful way of letting her know. Their doctor says no problem, that the next time Millie is in the kitchen Henry should call out to her from someplace in the house far away, and keep trying, from closer and closer, until she responds. So he starts in the bedroom, calling out "Millie, what are we having for lunch?" No response. He moves closer, tries again – "Millie, what are we having for lunch?" No response. A third time, no response again. Finally he is in the kitchen itself, practically side by side with Millie, and he asks yet again, "What are

we having for lunch?” At which point she says to him, with considerable exasperation: “Henry, for the fourth time, chicken.”

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Henry came to mind as I thought through the presentation on immigration, and this summer’s legislative debacle, by Crystal Williams, deputy director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. She gave an explainer on U.S. immigration law that was truly crystal clear, and a masterful deconstruction of the demagoguery, obfuscation and general muddle-headedness of what passed for debate on this year’s attempt to fix a broken system. In all the media coverage of that debate I saw not a single story that was half so coherent on why people immigrate to the United States, the Catch-22s rife within the system of legal immigration, and the fundamental inequities in our treatment of the illegal immigrants on whom our economy as presently structured depends.

Crystal told us the usual estimate is that between 12 to 15 million persons are in the United States illegally, or one of three foreign-born residents. Some of them have simply walked across the border. Some slipped in by over-staying student visas or by exploiting the visa waiver program under which the citizens of some countries, mostly in the European Union, are permitted to travel to the U.S. for 90 days without applying formally for a visa. Some of the most poignant cases involve individuals fleeing persecution. They have acquired fake documents because that is the only way to get out and they acknowledge as much on arrival here, seeking political asylum. If such individuals are apprehended at the border in Texas they are usually released on their own recognizance while the asylum case is considered, Crystal said, but if in New York they are invariably put in detention. Either way - -and here’s one of those Catch-22s – they are prosecuted for false documents even as their asylum claims are being processed.

If you listened carefully to Crystal you would never again fall for some of the most notorious immigration-debate myths. Like “amnesty,” that rallying cry of Lou Dobbs and Patrick Buchanan and the talk-show legions who decried the bill’s alleged free pass to citizenship for illegal aliens. This for a bill that required years of reporting in to parole officers and fines totaling some \$12,000 and then, maybe, full citizenship. Or the claim that we’d never have been in this fix if would-be immigrants had simply “followed the rules.” What rules? The quota for family-based immigration is currently set at 226,000 persons per year. There is a quota of another 140,000 immigrants per year based on employment, and of that total only 5,000 slots are set aside for unskilled occupations. So if you wonder why all those Mexicans who work in landscaping or other minimum-wage work are here illegally, Crystal said, the answer is quite simple: There is no path for them to legality.

Or take the association of illegal immigrants with crime, one of the biggest whoppers of them all. I always go home from these conferences with one or two facts that really stick in my mind, and here’s a candidate for this year, from Crystal. In the population of men aged 18 to 39, the biggest single group of individuals in prison in the United States, the rate of incarceration among native-born men is five times higher than that of those

foreign born. “People are always talking about assimilation,” Crystal said. “But maybe we shouldn’t assimilate these folks – they’re doing much better than we are.”

What if we wanted to enact a rational immigration reform? Not likely, of course, at least not until after the next presidential election, but Crystal gave some pointers that anyone running for president ought to keep in mind. Open up immigration to close family members of those legally here already. Create a real path to legality for those already here (and without onerous “touchback” criteria that require returning to home countries and more red tape first). Acknowledge that it’s not enough just to “legalize” those already here, that rational policy requires a recognition of the obvious: that we are a capitalist society and we depend on open markets, including an open market on labor. And ultimately it’s the market, not government quotas, that should determine how many immigrants we require.

It was fascinating to go from Crystal’s talk to that of Ambassador Lara-Pena, and to hear his perspective on the immigration debate. Or rather, on one of the issues that isn’t the subject of much debate here – the deportation of foreign residents convicted of crimes. We’re talking here about legal foreign residents, individuals with green cards, some of them second-generation people who have lived in the states since the age of three or four. Present law says that upon conviction of certain crimes such individuals can be deported back to their “home” countries, even if they have not lived in those countries since early childhood and have no family or personal ties. 30,000 Dominicans have been deported to the Dominican Republic under that law during the past 10 years, the ambassador said; some 90,000 Mexicans a year are deported for the same reason, often with no coordination with the “home” country beyond a few hours’ notice that a plane or busload of people is about to arrive. The home country – the Dominican Republic, Mexico, or whatever – is left to face the consequences of these “U.S. home-grown criminals,” Lara-Pena said. “They didn’t grow up in the Dominican Republic. They grew up here.”

Addressing the question of this conference Ambassador Lara-Pena said the nations of his region, and of the world, want respect from the United States, to be seen as partners. Speaking of the Caribbean they would like understanding for one of the world’s most diverse areas, comprising 40 million people on 30 islands and ranging from populations as small as 75,000 to countries like the Dominican Republic of 7 million and more. They would like trade policies that give millions of Dominican-Americans the chance to eat oranges, avocados and coconuts that come from the Dominican Republic as well as from Florida and California. They would like the U.S. government to make good on its international pledges, among them the U.N.’s Millennium Development Goals, and to do so without restrictive policies such as those imposed on HIV-AIDS programs that undercut achievement of policy results. “HIV-AIDS is not a moral problem,” he said. “It’s a health problem.”

Lara-Pena noted that one of the Dominican Republic’s biggest challenges is Haiti, with which it shares the island of Hispaniola. Some 800,000 Haitians live and work in the Dominican Republic and the political chaos within Haiti has made it a haven for drugs, arms shipments and human trafficking. But when he was asked whether the international

community should intervene, in near failed states such as Haiti or Zimbabwe, Lara-Pena urged caution. “I think the international community has to look very carefully at Iraq and at what happened there,” he said, “when a group of countries decided to go there and ‘fix’ the situation.”

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Those who got here Friday afternoon for the UNA Western North Carolina Chapter workshop heard a fascinating talk from UNC-Asheville humanities professor Mark Gibney on the politics of apology – the recent spate of mea culpas from governments, international institutions, and individuals on everything from business complicity in slavery to Britain’s role in perpetuating the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Potato Famine in Ireland, from failures to stop the genocide in Rwanda to Dan Rather’s sloppy reporting on President Bush’s National Guard service during the Vietnam war.

More often than not, Gibney suggests, these “apologies” have related more to public relations than contrition, to damage-limitation rather than true catharsis. He was especially harsh on Bush’s grudging response to reports of abusive treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, waiting several days after the first news reports before issuing any apology at all and then in a rather back-handed way – at a joint news conference with Jordan’s King Abdullah in which the president said “I told him I was sorry for the humiliation sufferance by Iraqi prisoners...”

For official apologies to carry weight they must be accompanied by efforts to achieve justice, Gibney said, and they should come as the result of discussion and negotiation between the entity offering an apology and the entity to which it is given. And perhaps most important, in any such apology there must not be the perception, or the reality, of hypocrisy. Meet those tests, however, and an apology can serve real ends, particularly at the level of nations and peoples. “Although apologies appear to be about the past in reality they are much more about the present but also the future,” Gibney said. “They are an indication of the kind of people that we think we have become – or at least what we hope to become – rather than simply serving as a condemnation of people who came before us.”

Friday night independent historian Patrick Inman kicked off the conference proper with a presentation on the importance of identity in understanding regional conflicts and the basis of that conflict. An understanding of identity in groups encompasses the group’s perception of what we owe others, what others owe us, what we try to make of ourselves, and what we consider the good life. In developing these concepts Patrick emphasized that any group’s sense of the good is learned in the same way we learn our native languages: our group identity in its most basic terms is that which we grew up with.

Patrick developed these ideas within a framework of two ideal types of group identity: the first identity, the ethnic identity, is one based on tradition, ethnic classification, and the sharing of a common history; while the second identity, the sectarian identity, is one based on a shared vision, a belief in the possibility of the creation of a better world, and

the desire to embrace a forward-looking perspective. These two identities represent two polar extremes that act as bookmarks for the range, or spectrum, of possible identity classifications.

This framework provides a means for understanding regional conflict: some conflicts represent the tensions of one ethnic group against another ethnic group; some conflicts pit a group with an ethnic identity against a group organized around sectarian principles; and some conflicts represent the conflict that can arise when there is more than one sectarian viewpoint.

Finally, in understanding these conflicts Patrick pointed out the vital role played by people who bridge the gaps, those individuals who manage to be connected to both groups. These cross-cutters, through trade, intermarriage or other types of intergroup interaction can effectively serve to reduce prejudice or group conflict.

It works the other way too, of course, as individuals exploit ethnic, sectarian or other forms of identity to divide and rule, amassing power for themselves while wreaking havoc on their societies. The past 15 years are rife with examples, from the Balkans to Rwanda and from Colombia and Sri Lanka to eastern Congo and Sudan.

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Saturday night Bill Dinkins reported on the high school trip to the United Nations, New York City and Washington and we heard from Jamison Hackelman of East Forsyth High School, one of the finalists in this year's speech contest.

Jamison took an unusual approach that catches your attention right from his title: "The Decline and Rise of the American Empire." He takes as a given American parallels to Rome, the fact of American empire, and why America would appear fated to decline as well. But then he quotes from Edward Gibbon's assertion that Roman citizens could have averted the course of Roman history – and suggests that as individual Americans we too have a say in this country's fate.

The recent record isn't so good, he notes, from what he calls the mishandling of Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda in the 1990s to a lethargic response to the Darfur crisis and the sickening revelations of Abu Ghraib. Jamison calls for a reassertion of respect for the Constitution and for adherence to the Geneva Convention on Torture, the Genocide Convention and other international treaties. More broadly, he said we must lead the way in a redefining of what constitutes "American interests" – from a strictly economic interpretation to a broader call for global justice.

We're not at the last days yet (in its last 100 years the Roman empire had 37 emperors, Jamison reports, 25 of them removed by assassination) but his speech was nonetheless a tough admonition that America "look in the global mirror and acknowledge its internationally acclaimed image as an imperialistic force caught up in its own pomposity."

I should note also the other finalists in this year's contest: Taylor Westfall of Myers Park High School in Charlotte, Chris Denton of Northern High School in Durham, and Caitlin Hines of Mt. Tabor High School in Winston-Salem, this year's winner. Caitlin couldn't be with us this weekend but I wanted to share the flavor of her direct, common-sense points: that "the economy of each nation has a direct influence on that of other nations" and that "if the global economy is to prosper all countries must work together." Caitlin also underscored some truisms that our policy makers too often shunt aside: that "though there will always be unavoidable wars, unforgiven debts, and natural disasters, the United States has the capacity and the responsibility to influence these issues" – and that "as an economic, financial and global superpower the United States of America is ethically obligated to offer humanitarian, financial and military aid to nations which require assistance."

Congratulations to Caitlin, to Jamison, Taylor and Chris – and to all the participants in this year's contest.

Worth noting, by the way, was Jamison's grace in introducing himself to us, and the way he paid tribute to the many ways the members of this group have worked, over many decades, to keep this nation true to itself.

He acknowledged there was a bit of disparity between him and many of us – "I'm 17 and you're not" sort of summed it up. But he also paid tribute to some of the achievements wrought by all these gray heads. "I want to thank you," he said, "for bravely modeling activism."

Modeling activism – now that's a good segue to Frank Smith, a founder of the American Freedom Association and a mainstay of this organization and so many good causes through 98 years of well-lived life. My mother Betsy Sawyer paid tribute to Frank on behalf of us all --recalling his steadfast commitment to law and world federalism in the worst days of McCarthyism, his insistent voice for peace in the letters columns of the Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel, that big bass at Arbor Acres he caught and released so many times that its lips were scarred from having so many hooks removed.

Of course if Frank had been here he would have interrupted her once or twice -- he would be interrupting me now, eyes twinkling, voice booming – but I know he would have seconded her parting prayer, "that we may all stay alive as long as we live."

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Frank would have appreciated Gen. Vessey's use of analogies to surveying, to the old days when chains, slide rules and a pinch of the fingers were sometimes the best tools you had for setting a course. To get an orienting line you needed a known direction, the location of two known points, he said – and establishing an orienting line to our future is much the same: You need to understand where we came from, and what direction we're turning from.

Gen. Vessey spent his career in the army, beginning in World War II and culminating in service as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Reagan. For most of that time he said his creed was that of General, then President, George Washington: that “we can best preserve peace by being at all times prepared for war.” He made it clear that he remains committed to American preeminence in military power but he also declared himself a “late convert” to making a much higher priority than it has previously been of preventing conflicts before they begin.

A key part of that initiative, as developed under the Council of Foreign Relations’ Center for Preventive Action that Gen. Vessey chairs, has been engagement of civil society, non-government groups in areas prone to conflict. It’s very much a work in progress, he noted, with probably more missed opportunities than signal achievements. He cited a letter from President Clinton in the mid 1990s, responding to the center’s concerns about steps needed to reduce violence in the Great Lakes region of Africa. Gen. Vessey said that it was an excellent letter, touting all that the administration was doing. “The fact that we got that letter attested to the influence of our center, and of the council. The subsequent three million deaths in that region attested to the inadequacy of the efforts the president had outlined, the inadequacy of the U.N.’s response and our own.”

Other instances where preventive diplomacy might have saved billions of dollars, thousands of lives, included Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, when the U.S. largely withdrew as well, and the Balkans in the early 1990s, where we put off intervention too long. Would Iraq also fall in that list? Gen. Vessey didn’t say, noting only that the war was poorly executed and that it made no sense to strive for economic development and political reconstruction in the absence of basic security.

I would like to have heard him go further down that path, addressing what taking the military course in Iraq, this massive expenditure in weaponry and lives, has cost us, especially in the Arab world and in the broader Middle East. On that subject I very much appreciated the perspective this morning of Marilyn Booth, director of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Illinois, who helped us think through Arabic literature in the shadow of the Iraq war.

I was reminded again of Klaus’s story of Henry and Millie, of who’s doing the shouting and who it is who’s really deaf. In the publishing world when it comes to literary writing on Arab and Islamic themes the shouting has been over books that lionized western culture and reduced Middle Eastern perspectives to stereotype, even caricature – books like “Infidel” or John Updike’s “The Terrorist” or Azar Nafazi’s “Reading Lolita in Tehran” – reassuring reaffirmations of our own (perceived) moral superiority but not of much use in truly penetrating the perspective of cultured different from our own. On that score far better to read some of the work Marilyn herself has translated, the novels of Egyptian feminists or books like “The Girls of Riyadh” or “Disciples of Passion” – or any of the great list of recommended reading from the region she made available to us.

As a translator Marilyn is uniquely positioned to talk about translation in its larger meaning, how so much of life in today’s world is about translation – and how the spread

of English as the world's *lingua franca* in some makes the task of translating, translating correctly, even harder. The problem with English is linguistic hegemony, the way it tends to colonize words from other languages and in the process narrow, or distort, their meanings. Case in point: that now infamous word *jihad*. Marilyn reminded us that its roots in Arabic have to do with "effort" or "struggle," struggle in the sense of the inner struggle of a Muslim to be a good believer. Its extended meaning has been the subject of debate within the Arab world since the beginning of Islam – the idea that jihad also encompasses the struggle to insure that the community of believers is safe from invasion. But even there it was seen as word of defense, far removed from its identification today among many western writers -- and yes, among some al Qaida adherents, too – as the totem for aggressive outward violence.

Far better, Marilyn said, for the United States – for all of us – to focus on how we can better listen to, and listen with, the rest of the world. That "listen *with*" is important, she said, because it carries with it the implication of a collateral relationship, to work at getting inside someone else's skin and understanding how the world looks to her or him.

It's wonderful to have her list of recommended reading. We should create an on-line discussion group or, better yet, persuade Marilyn to come back next summer and talk about what we've found.

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One of the current projects we're sponsoring at the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting is on Iraq, where print journalist David Enders and videographer Rick Rowley are doing extraordinary work chronicling the war's impact on hundreds of thousands of Iraqis displaced from their homes and, increasingly, their country. The overall project is entitled "Iraq: Death of a Nation?" You can find it on our website, at [www.pulitzercenter.org](http://www.pulitzercenter.org), with links to David's radio and print reporting and the first fruits of Rick's photography. I urge you to take a look at their blog as well, where they are posting almost daily reports on what it is like today to live in Iraq. As part of that blog Rick has been filing poetry too, written in the style of Iraqi writer Saadi Yousef, who grew up in Basra and then spent many years exiled in Lebanon. On Friday Rick posted the following, "Custer's Cavalry," after a few days spent embedded with a U.S. military unit:

black smoke billows into a starless sky.

we were the ones who dried the canals and planted death in the river bank -  
powder and steel among the reeds.  
smallpox in a dakota blizzard.  
boot leather on the slave-bricked streets...

why does nothing taste good?

the key twisted off in the ignition.  
a bag full of hair and skin.

7 years old, shaking with sobs.  
his rifle drags from a limp arm.

we could not see. . .  
lungs gulped, blood clotted, young skin knitted itself together as fast as it could.  
we did not know, we could not see,  
how the metal had passed right through him.

who have we left alive to forgive us now?  
a killer in the tall grass,  
a thief among the white stone houses,  
a stranger in the streets of the port city.

the hot wind steals my breath and presses me flat against the seat of the  
chopper.  
i can not open my eyes, but feel the cool column of air over the river.

and we all want to believe  
the wet wind will break the back  
of our endless summer.

but no - the fire keeps burning.

and no - there are things in this world  
that can never be forgiven.

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Gen. Vessey quotes from a review by Madeleine Albright of a book by the commander of UN forces during the Rwanda genocide. In it she calls failure of the Clinton administration to act sooner the deepest regret of her years in government. It was not enough to wait for disaster and then to cry that something must be done, she said; the world must act in advance, even if the cost of conflict prevention is high. Gen. Vessey differed only in noting that in most instances the cost of not acting has proved far higher in the end.

For the members of a group like the American Freedom Association it was surprising, and certainly refreshing, to hear such arguments from one of the nation's former top generals. The second part of his address, a call for only limited further reductions in America's nuclear arsenal while at the same time expanding use of commercial nuclear power, went down a little harder, but here too there was a sober call to recognize some important realities – that access to affordable energy is essential to ending global disparities in income and that, as Gen. Vessey put it, “God is unlikely to let us un-invent nuclear weapons.” He dismissed the calls by some old Cold Warriors, men like George Shultz or Sam Nunn or Gen. Lee Butler, that the U.S. consider steps toward the outright abolition of nuclear weapons. “Someone is going to be preeminent nuclear power in the

world,” he said, adding that he would much prefer that the U.S. wield that power instead of someone like Osama bin Laden. “You can bleat about all the warts and sores of the United States but I will still feel safer if the United States is the preeminent power.”

Recent history might question the premise, or at least remind us that safety might lie in finding ways to share that power. Yet I think all of us would second Gen. Vessey’s larger point, that these are issues far too important to leave to government alone.

He said that in his active-duty career he was known as a three-speech general, and one standard in his repertoire was the speech on re-enlistment. That’s the speech he gave us Saturday night, Gen. Vessey said – “the re-enlistment speech. I want you to re-enlist in the cause of conflict prevention.”

“The great American pronoun isn’t ‘they,’ it isn’t ‘I,’ it’s ‘we,’” he said. “It’s ‘we the people,’ in order to form a more perfect union.”

I like that message. I especially like hearing it from a former chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It’s up to us to act on it, in the months and years ahead. Our country depends on it, and so does the world.