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Eulogy for Warren Christopher

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As delivered

Like A. B. [Culvahouse] — and like so many of you — I feel blessed by Chris’s loyalty and generosity as a friend and mentor, and by the gentleness and good humor of his nature.

I went to work for Chris a little over 18 years ago, when he became our 63rd Secretary of State. I saw — up-close, day-in-and-day-out — the integrity, discipline, and dignity that he brought to public service. I also saw how much he relished the chance — the “chance of a lifetime,” as he called it in the title of his memoir — to advance America’s interests in the world.

But with that opportunity came a welter of challenges that was, even by today’s standards, daunting in the extreme. The Soviet monolith had disintegrated into 15 pieces, two of which—Russia and Ukraine—were nuclear-armed and spoiling for trouble. Iran, Iraq, and North Korea threatened their neighborhoods and our allies. The Middle East peace process was a dream more than a reality. Haiti was a humanitarian disaster and a political outrage just off our shores. The implosion of Yugoslavia had re-ignited war in Europe.

Contemplating all those tests of American power and responsibility, Chris had a portrait of Dean Acheson put on the wall of his office. He took inspiration from the legacy of that particular predecessor, another successful lawyer who had titled his own memoir “Present at the Creation,” which is how Acheson saw the transformative period after World War II when the U.S. was the master architect of a system that would keep the peace between antagonistic superpowers.

I remember a meeting with Chris, early in 1993, when he asked several of us to help him assess the trials ahead. Peter Tarnoff — who, along with other members of the Christopher team, is here today -- pointed to the Acheson portrait and drew a wan smile from our boss by remarking, “Well, Chris, I guess we’re present at the re-creation.”

Chris saw it that way too, and he rose to the task. In the years that followed, he made a substantial, enduring —and I would add, under-appreciated — contribution to the architecture of world peace. He did so by strengthening the post-cold-war rule-based international order and expanding it to include former adversaries.

He laid a foundation on which his successors could build. Two of them honor him by being here today — Secretaries Albright and Rice – and a third, Secretary Clinton, called me over the weekend to say that she would have been here if she didn't have to be in London for an emergency meeting on Libya.

A. B. spoke movingly about the credo that Chris crafted for O'Melveny & Myers — his vision for what he called a “values-driven... global” law firm. Chris brought a variant of that same commitment to his career at the other end of the country, in Washington. He believed that we Americans need a values-driven foreign policy that recognizes global interdependence as an organizing principle of statecraft.

In his earlier stint at the Department, as Cy Vance's deputy in the 1970s, Chris had led a sustained effort to make sure that all pertinent agencies of the U.S. government defended human rights around the world.

Returning as Secretary in the 90s, one of Chris's first acts was to create a senior management position at State responsible for ensuring that the U.S. government as a whole gave priority to transnational challenges: promoting democracy, fighting cross-border crime and the spread of infectious diseases, stemming the proliferation of lethal technologies, and reining in climate change.

These structural reforms are part of Chris's own legacy — institutionalized in the processes, priorities, and the organization chart of U.S. government. For him, institutions mattered. But staffing — recruiting people who met his high standards — mattered even more. The most conspicuous and consequential case in point, of course, was his recommendation, in 1992, that Governor Clinton pick Senator Gore as his running mate. But at lower levels too, Chris was a connoisseur and cultivator of talent, whether it was summer associates at O'Melveny or junior officers of the Foreign Service.

He also took very seriously the exercise of America's unique influence in filling top slots in institutions of regional and global governance. In that regard, the two most critical personnel decisions in which he played a vital role — were the selection of Javier Solana for the leadership of NATO and the elevation of Kofi Annan to the post of Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Had those two men not been in those posts, the combination of diplomacy-backed-by-force and force-backed-by-diplomacy in the Balkans would have been far more difficult, and far less successful.

Bosnia was one of several protracted crises that Chris — at great expenditure of energy and considerable strain on his legendary patience — helped defuse.

He did much of the heavy lifting in forging the Dayton Peace Accords.

Along with Vice President Gore, he mediated relentlessly between Moscow and Kiev to ensure the removal of nuclear weapons from Ukraine. Had that effort failed, Eurasia would be a far more dangerous continent than it is today.

Chris also worked with Madeleine, then our ambassador at the UN, on two innovations of profound and lasting importance. In response to genocide, they led in setting up and empowering an international tribunal to prosecute war criminals; and — in the context of Haiti — they persuaded the Security Council to approve the use of force to restore democracy in a country that had fallen victim to a military coup.

These two breakthroughs gave substance—and muscle — to the principle that all governments have a responsibility to protect their own citizens and are answerable to the international community if they fail to do so. That principle, which Chris helped pioneer a decade and a half ago, is crucial backdrop to the events we are seeing play out now in Libya, as Muammar Gaddafi's forces retreat from a citizenry that his own unrelenting and brutal abuse of power has turned against him.

And then there was Chris's heroic and sustained exertion in the Middle East. His doggedness and skill were vital in cementing peace between Israel and Jordan, and in securing a ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon. His 16 trips to Damascus and Jerusalem in search of an Israeli-Syrian deal left no doubt that here was U.S. Secretary of State prepared to go the last mile — and never, ever give up.... and, I might add, never, ever lose his cool or let the other guy get his goat.

Martin Indyk recalls a backbreaking trip to the region that ended with a visit to Rabat for an audience with the King of Morocco. Chris was willing to do a lot for his country, but not eat any more Middle Eastern cuisine than was absolutely necessary. So he declined a royal invitation to dinner and asked for a working meeting instead. The King was so offended that when he received Chris, he was wearing slippers and a velvet smoking jacket. (Imagine how Chris, in his Turnbull & Asser pinstripes, felt about *that*). Worse, His Majesty kept blowing cigarette smoke in Chris's face while haranguing him at length and repudiating an agreement for new ties between Israel and the kingdom that Martin and others had painstakingly negotiated.

Afterward, when Martin apologized to Chris for putting him through the embarrassment, Chris just smiled and said mildly, "Well, that's what kings do."

In addition to never raising his voice, Chris used attentive silence as an instrument of diplomacy. He was — to a rare degree, and to good effect — a superb listener. He was so clearly attuned to the subtleties of what he was hearing that the other parties at the table were more likely to trust him to make an honest, reasonable, and imaginative effort to find common ground.

These characteristics add up to a paradox: Chris's preference for working in quiet ways enhanced his effectiveness as a policymaker and diplomat, yet it tended to detract from public awareness of how much he achieved — and how skillfully he achieved it.

Bill Clinton said it best in a tribute to Chris published today in *Time* magazine: “Warren Christopher had the lowest ratio of ego to accomplishment of any public servant I've ever worked with. That made him easy to underestimate, but all Americans should be grateful that, along with great ability, he possessed the stamina and the steel to accomplish things that were truly extraordinary.”

I would conclude with one last thought, picking up on A.B.'s recollection of Chris's admonition to his partners that “it's acceptable to love a law firm.” Chris also regarded it as acceptable to love an agency of the U.S. Government -- the Department of State -- and the arduous, exhausting, sometimes dangerous, often thankless work that goes on there.

Chris loved his own chance to be at the helm of the Department and (just as at O'Melveny) to work harder than anyone else. He loved the experience because it allowed him to serve all of us, and, in doing so, it allowed him to make good, yet again, on those values he that A. B. told us he imbued at O'Melveny and that he so cherished in all aspects of his exemplary life: distinctive leadership, superior citizenship, and, above all, uncompromising excellence—as a man and as a statesman.