

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB NEWSMAKER LUNCHEON WITH AYAAN HIRSI ALI,
AUTHOR OF "INFIDEL"
AND RESEARCH FELLOW AT THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

TOPICS INCLUDE: ISLAM AND THE WEST

MODERATOR: JERRY ZREMSKI, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MR. ZREMSKI: Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press
Club. My name is Jerry Zremski, and I'm the Washington bureau chief
for the Buffalo News and president of the National Press Club.

I'd like to welcome our club members and their guests here today,
as well as the audience that's watching us live on C-SPAN.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I will
ask as many questions as time permits.

Please hold your applause during the speech so that we have as
much time for questions as possible. For our broadcast audience, I'd
like to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the guests
and members of the general public who attend our luncheons and not
necessarily from the working press. (Laughter.)

I would like now to introduce our head table guests and ask them
to stand briefly when their names are called. From your right, Gil
Klein, reporter for Media General News Service and a past president of
the National Press Club; Marilou Donahue, producer of "Artistically
Speaking" and a member of the NPC Speakers Committee; Tamila Bay (sp),

a freelance journalist and member of our Young Members Committee and our Professional Development Committee; Emily Renwick (sp), assistant and guest of Ms. Hirsi Ali; Vickie Walton-James, Washington senior editor for Tribune Publishing; Yale Levin (sp), an assistant and guest of Ms. Hirsi Ali.

Skipping over the podium, Melissa Charbonneau of CBN, vice chair of the National Press Club Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our speaker for just one second, Doris Margolis, president of Editorial Associates and the Press Club member who arranged today's luncheon; Juergen Reinhut (sp), assistant and guest of Ms. Hirsi Ali; Keith Hill, editor/writer for BNA and vice chair of the National Press Club board of governors; and Oscar Bartoli, editor and publisher of the Washington Letter. (Applause.)

Today's speaker, author and human rights advocate Ayaan Hirsi Ali, has traveled far and braved many dangers in her 37 years, and in doing so, she has become one of the world's most lauded and controversial champions of women's rights. Ms. Hirsi Ali was born in Somalia in 1969. Escaping from an unwanted arranged marriage, she fled to the Netherlands in 1992, becoming a Dutch citizen in 1997 and winning election to the Dutch Parliament in 2003.

The following year, she and Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh collaborated on a film about Muslim women, titled "Submission." Shortly thereafter, Van Gogh was murdered. Attached to his body was a five-page letter threatening Ms. Hirsi Ali's life. A subsequent TV documentary which concerned her 1992 application for asylum set in motion her decision to leave the Netherlands and move to America. She is now a research associate at the American Enterprise Institute here in Washington.

Her views on Islam, and especially its treatment of Muslim women, have continued to spark death threats from her enemies, along with enthusiastic gratitude and plaudits from her many admirers. Eagerly sought after as a speaker in many parts of the world, she is often interviewed on television and in newspapers and in news magazines. Time magazine listed her as one of 2005's 100 most influential people, and Reader's Digest named her European of the Year for 2006. She was also the recipient of the 2006 Moral Courage Award of the American Jewish Committee.

The fight for dignity for the world's women is the centerpiece of her work, and she has fought for that dignity in the most personal of ways. Her most recent book is "Infidel," a gripping memoir that details her life experiences and her renunciation of Islam. Earlier books include "The Son Factory" and "The Caged Virgin: A Muslim Woman's Cry for Reason." All told, these books bring to life a worldview built on respect for the dignity of every individual, and they're proof that now, as always, courage is among the greatest of human values.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in a warm National Press Club welcome for our speaker today, Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

MS. HIRSI ALI: (Applause.) Thank you, Jerry. Thank you, Doris,

thank you, Angela, for the warm welcome and for the hospitality and for the great lunch. (Laughter.)

The first time that I was at a gathering like this one was in November 2005 at the Krasnapolsky Hotel in Amsterdam; not quite like this, because there's only one National Press Club -- (laughter) -- (I love ?). I was invited to a session on media coverage of Islam, and "Submission" was shown. "Submission" is a 10-minute film I made with Theo Van Gogh. As many of you know, he was killed by a Muslim.

I find myself in the odd position of defending freedom of expression, free press and the rights of women against Arab Islamic journalists and commentators, not mullahs.

I find it odd, because the Western journalists whose conference it was were either quiet, mumbled something about free expression or approached me after the session and whispered into my ear that I had done a good job. I noticed the embarrassment they felt at defending the very rights from which they earned their bread.

I noticed the same sense of uneasiness in early '06 among Western journalists, academics, politicians and commentators on how to respond to the cartoons of Mohammed in Denmark. In fact, many seriously defended the assertion that Denmark had to apologize for the cartoons. This attitude was repeated in the fall of last year, when the pope quoted a Byzantine emperor who wrote that the founder of Islam spread his religion by the sword, and The New York Times urged the pope to apologize.

Tony Blair, a leader I admire, wrote in the first issue of this year's Foreign Affairs magazine that what we were facing after the 11th of September was a battle of ideas, a battle of values. In his article, Blair began by incisively outlining the most crucial conflict of our time, but then lost the line of his argument in inconsistency when he came to clarifying the parties involved in the war of values. He backpedaled against his argument and declared that the Koran is a great book, ahead of its time, and good for women. (Laughter.)

Why are Westerners so insecure about everything that is so wonderful about the West -- political freedom, free press, freedom of expression, equal rights for women and men and gays and heterosexuals, critical thinking and the great strength of scrutinizing ideas and especially faith? It is not the end of history. The 21st century began with a battle of ideas, and this battle is about the values of the West versus those of Islam. Tony Blair and the pope should not be embarrassed in saying it, and you should stop self-censoring.

Islam and liberal democracy are incompatible. Cultures and religions are not equal. And perhaps most important of all, Muslims are not half-wits who respond only in violence. The Koran is not a great book. It is reactionary and it's full of misogyny. And the Byzantine emperor's analysis of Mohammed was accurate -- he did spread his faith by the sword.

From this perspective, journalists, like all the rest of us, face the unpleasant reality of taking sides or getting lost in the incoherence of the so-called middle ground. The role of journalists

servicing the West, who understand what this particular battle is about, will inform their audiences accordingly.

As I travel from country to country to testify from experience and observation that Islamic dogma creates a cult of death, a cage for women, and a curse against knowledge, I get both support and opposition. Europeans and Americans, and recently Australians, ask me: But what about the good Muslim living next door to me? What about the different schools of thought in Islam, is there no difference between the Muslims of Indonesia and the ones in Somalia or the Muslims in Saudi Arabia and those in Turkey? Can we really generalize? What about the women who voluntarily wear the head scarf and the burqa and are happy to relinquish their freedom as their faith requires? They ask me: If we give Catholics and Protestants and Jews their schools and their universities, isn't it only fair to give Muslims theirs too? If generations of Jews, Italians and Irish have assimilated, is it unreasonable to think that Muslims will assimilate too eventually? Isn't it more fruitful to engage in debate with your opponent and convince him through dialogue to take back his declaration of war than to attack him? Isn't it obvious that military attacks, such as those in Afghanistan after 9/11 and Iraq, create more terrorists and, therefore, more people who are determined to destroy the West than there were if we had no dialogue with them?

All these questions are very serious and very legitimate. Let's make a moral distinction between Islam and Muslims. Muslims are diverse. Some are like Irshad Manji and Tawfik Hamid and they want to seriously reform their faith. Others want to spread their beliefs through persuasion, or violence, or both. Others are apathetic and don't care much for politics. Others want to leave it and convert to Christianity or Nonie Darwish, or become an atheist, like me.

Islam and reform, as a set of beliefs, is hostile to everything Western. In a free society, yes, if Jews, Protestants and Catholics have their own schools, then Muslims should have theirs too. But how long should we ignore that in Muslim schools in the West, kids are taught to believe that Jews are pigs and dogs, that they should distance themselves from unbelievers, and that jihad is a virtue.

Isn't it odd that everywhere in Europe with large Muslim organizations that demands are made not to teach kids about the Holocaust, while in mosques and Muslim bookshops "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" are distributed?

And what about in Muslim lands? Jews, Catholics and Protestants cannot have their own schools or churches or graveyards. If Muslims can proselytize in Vatican City, why can't Christians proselytize in Mecca? Why do we find this acceptable?

If Christians, Jews and atheists take to the streets in large numbers to protest against their own elected governments in objection to the war in Iraq and to the way the war on terror is being conducted, why don't Muslims march in equally large numbers against the beheadings of Western aid workers? Why don't Muslims stand up for their own? Why are Jews and Christians and atheists in the West the ones fighting genocide in Darfur? Why does it pass unnoticed in Muslim lands when Shi'as kill Sunnis and Sunnis kill Shi'as by the

thousands? It doesn't add up, does it?

What is the role of journalism today? I would ask you to look into these questions, please.

As a woman in the West, I have access to education. I have a job. I can change jobs as I wish. I can marry the man of my choice, or I can choose not to marry at all. If nature allows it, I can have any number of children I want. I can manipulate nature and freeze my eggs. I can have an abortion; I can own property; I can travel wherever I want to; I can read whichever book, newspaper or magazine I wish. I can watch any movie I want to or go to the museum of my choice.

I can have an opinion on the moral choices of others and express my opinion, even publish it, without a threat to my life. And I can change my mind as time goes by. I can establish a political party or join an existing one. I'm free to change parties or give up membership. I can vote; I can choose not to vote. I can stand for election to office or go into business. This is what makes the West so great.

In Muslim lands, except for a very lucky few, most women are denied education, have no jobs, are forced into marriage with strangers. In the name of Islam, women are denied the right to their bodies. They cannot choose whether to have children and how many.

They have no rights to abortion, and most of them -- many of them -- die trying to get one. They can own no property, trade or travel without the risk of robbery or rape.

Most women and men live in state and religious censorship on what to read, if they can read at all; what films to watch; and they have hardly any museums or arts they can enjoy. Of the 57 Muslim nations who are members of the Organization of Muslim Conference, only two are democracies. Both are failed and corrupt, and both face the risk of being overtaken by the agents of pure Islam.

Turkey has a safety check in the shape of the army, and Indonesia doesn't have one. In none of these countries, except for the usual showpieces to delude the West, are women allowed to establish their own political party or play any meaningful role in one, vote or run for office. This obsession with subjugating women is one of the things that makes Islam so low, and the agents of Islam, from Riyadh to Tehran, from Islamabad to Cairo, know that any improvement in the lives of women will lead to the demise of Islam and the disappearance of their power base, and this is why they are so desperate to cage in women. This is also why they hate the West, among other things.

Please don't be fooled by the few shrill voices in or out of the veil that enjoy the status quo and betray their fellow women. If we do not understand the difference between Islam and the West, why one is so great and the other so low, and we don't fight back and win this battle of ideas in order to preserve civilization, in my view, there's no point to your profession or mine.

I now invite you to ask me questions. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much. We do indeed have a lot of questions, a lot of questions about Islam in the world today, a lot of questions about you and your life.

We'll start by talking about Islam. One person in the audience writes, "What is your hope for the future of women in Islam? Will women ever be accepted as full participants in the religion?"

MS. HIRSI ALI: In a -- what's the hope -- in a best-case scenario, I would say there is hope. The voices of women like Irshad Manji will multiply, and more and more women will realize that they are denied basic human rights, they will organize, and they will dismantle that system, and they can probably and will probably be able to civilize Islam.

And the other case scenario is that the agents of Islam and the agents of jihad, who are becoming more powerful by the day, will reduce the circumstances of women living in Arab Muslim countries, even if they don't extend to the West, to the situation that the Taliban women faced -- the women in Afghanistan faced under the leadership of the Taliban.

MR. ZREMSKI: Another questioner says that Christianity used to be a violent, intolerant, misogynistic religion and it changed. (Laughter.) Is that at all a sign that there's some hope for Muslims to change -- for Islam to change?

MS. HIRSI ALI: In the evolution of Christianity, many things were working for it. The freethinkers who challenged the church and Christian dogmas got away with things that individual freethinkers in Muslim countries have not gotten away with. Yes, in Christian lands books were banned, yes, people were set on fire by the church, but it wasn't pervasive enough. In Islam, you are not going corrected by the state or by an institution like the church, every other Muslim has the duty, the obligation to correct anyone who criticizes Islam. Criticizing Islam is considered by Muslims to be an act of heresy, of apostasy.

Another strength that Christianity had that Muslims don't have is that there's not one single central authority or two -- or some institutions that can negotiate, for instance, with the secular leaders and say, "As of now, we are going to change things." The Bible, according to Christians -- I'm not very -- as you know, I'm not very -- don't know very much about Christianity, but it's not considered to be the true word of God. The chapters are written by Paul and by Deuteronomy and by John and so on. You can argue with John and Paul; you can't argue with God himself. There is a read-only lock on the Koran, it's the voice of God. And in Islam, the concept, the relationship between God and the individual is one of total submission and complete obedience, and arguing with or disagreeing with anything in the Koran is considered, again, to be an act of putting yourself on the same level with God.

So there are many difficulties that Christianity did not have that Islam has that makes change and evolution within Islam extremely difficult.

MR. ZREMSKI: In the West, the Enlightenment brought about a separation of church and state. But in the Islamic world, theocracy continues to be the way of the world. Why is the West not more vocal against theocracy?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I think the West is vocal, very vocal about theocracy, but they're only vocal about Christian theocracy. It seems to me as if most Westerners are fighting the battle of yesterday and not the battle of today. Today the world is not threatened by Christian theocracy. I haven't met -- seen any serious movement that wants to replace the American Constitution with the Bible, or any of the European constitutions with the Bible. But there are very important and very strong, very powerful forces that have, A, already replaced constitutions. Look at Iran, for instance. Look at creeping Shari'a in Pakistan. So there have been successful attempts to introduce Muslim theocracies, and more and more of this movement is growing. So I think the West is opposing theocracy, but they are opposing the wrong theocracy.

MR. ZREMSKI: What more can the United States do to further the humane treatment of Muslim women worldwide?

MS. HIRSI ALI: After the war in Iraq, as the war in Iraq is conducted, as we face that, I've become more careful in pointing out what America should do to help others in far away places!

I think what America can do, definitely, is to help the women who are in America. And it's not only a matter of help, if you are a woman living in America, you are equal before the law, and that equality of the law has to be enforced. And I think Muslim women living in America and living in other Western countries who enjoy these rights will spread the word.

Going off and by military means trying to change or improve the position of Muslim women from a government point of view, I think that is not -- it's going to backfire; it's not going to be successful.

On the other hand, living in an age of internet, where information goes from one point of the globe to the other point of the globe, if so much propaganda is coming in from Muslim countries, I think, we can with our own propaganda of freedom and equality reach them as well. We are not doing it, though, at least not enough.

MR. ZREMSKI: How do you get to that point where there is more of an internet movement, for example, to reach Muslim women and to show them different ways?

MS. ALI: I think what I'd like to do is boost the confidence of Western thinkers and writers and people, because there is now a great deal of inhibition. People have been obsessed in the West with a dogma of equality that has gone to the absurd, and that cultures and religions are equal. And we can learn -- the Western attitude is one of, we can learn from other cultures but we have nothing to teach them. And so you will find large numbers of organizations active in third world and in Muslim countries that are bringing in money, that are bringing in material things, that are negotiating with the local

people but not bringing in the values and the skills and reason or rationality, the process of learning, that has made the West itself so great.

MR. ZREMSKI: How can the world get moderate Muslims to speak out against the extreme forms of Islam?

MS. ALI: I think that we should let go of obscure terms such as "moderate Muslims." There is Islam on the one hand and, as a set of beliefs, as a doctrine, it's not compatible with liberal democracy. It abhors life. It assigns women into a subordinate position.

Then you have Muslims that are as varied as we are.

Most Muslims live in tribal societies. Islam was founded in a tribal society. And for me, the definition of someone I would call a moderate Muslim would be someone like Irshad Manji, who acknowledges all of these things, acknowledges that there are Koranic commands that are incompatible with human rights, that call for the killing of other people and call for xenophobia.

I think it's with such individuals who, when they are confronted with their conscience, they are confronted with the life and the liberty of others, choose to follow their conscience. That -- those are the individuals that I would define as moderate Muslims.

How many of them there are, where we can find them, I don't know. But right now, if you look at -- between the 11th of September and today, not many of those have made themselves be heard or are visible.

MR. ZREMSKI: One of our guests -- from Indonesia, no doubt -- writes, "In Indonesia, a moderate form of Islam is pervasive. Women on the whole are free to be educated, to hold jobs and even to become president. Islamist parties never do well in the elections. Why lump Indonesia with the Arab countries?"

MS. HIRSI ALI: It's not fair to lump Indonesia or Turkey with the Arab countries, and I also think it's not fair to lump Jordan with Saudi Arabia. There are definitely differences.

But when the revival of Islam as a political movement first started, say in the 1920s, it started as a fringe movement. When I was in Kenya -- and I remember the first time that men let their beards grow, and women were covering themselves -- that we thought that was weird. We thought actually that that was Arab culture being imposed and brought to Kenya. We thought it would never last because of the heat, even though it's much hotter there.

If you look at a country like Indonesia today, yes, it's still a democracy, a weak one, but a democracy. Yes, today Islamist parties are losing the votes, and women can have an education and can participate in politics. But if you look at the movement, the radical Islamic movement within Indonesia, and the rate at which it is growing, then I think that gentleman should be more frightened by that and not deny that this movement is growing and that democracy in Indonesia is under threat.

MR. ZREMSKI: Would you say the same thing for Turkey?

MS. HIRSI ALI: Oh, yes. And the Turks have discovered it in a very painful way, because the Islamist party in power today in Turkey started out, again, as a fringe movement. The leader was first put in jail when he believed that he could start winning hearts and minds through jihad, and then later realized that he had -- he realized that democracy is weak, and he realized that you can erode democracy from within.

And he and his party started a grass-roots movement through Da'wa or missionary work. It's exactly the way the Prophet Mohammed went to work. And they won large populations, especially in the provinces. They have in Turkey taken control of the press, the educational system and the justice system and the police system. Having established their power in this way, the secular Turks have woken up to the nightmare today of almost being overtaken by an Islamist party. And they woke up to that nightmare when President Erdogan -- Prime Minister Erdogan decided to change the constitution when he gathered the mass behind him. And so I think Turkey is actually much more vulnerable than Indonesia. But fortunately, secularism has been long enough in Turkey, and the millions of Turks taking to the streets wanting to preserve their secular system gives me a lot of hope.

MR. ZREMSKI: President Bush has declared Islam to be a great religion and a religion of peace. Do you think he should, instead, be criticizing Islam?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I'd love to ask him what's great about Islam. We could have a debate on that.

MR. ZREMSKI: You talked about the Internet and how that's a possible way for people who are interested in reform to make some headway. Do you get any sense now, though, that perhaps groups such as al Qaeda have a little bit of a lead in terms of utilizing the Internet to reach young Muslims?

MS. HIRSI ALI: Al Qaeda and al Qaeda-like organizations, the jihadists, have -- yes, they still are leading in -- if we call again, the war of ideas, the battle of ideas, using the medium of the Internet. They are still leading because they are convinced that what they have to convey to the people is true. They are determined. Their message is very simple, but it's very consistent.

I think that people in the West can win that war, and a lot of activity has been undertaken since the 11th of September. But right now, the West itself, dividing itself either left and right in Europe, and conservatives and Democrats in the United States, are too involved with each other, consider themselves to be the enemy, and haven't yet unleashed the innovative forces that the West is capable of winning al Qaeda -- winning against al Qaeda.

MR. ZREMSKI: You've spoken before about modern-day slavery existing only in the Arab Islamic world. Why is that tolerated by the West?

MS. HIRSI ALI: Once again, I do not think that the West or

America can solve all the problems of the world. So for a group of Westerners, it's not on our turf; if there is slavery out there, then they should be fighting it.

Another reason is a lot of Westerners have been taught to believe that you should have respect for cultures, especially if they are cultures from a Third World country, especially if those people have color on their skin. Racism has been defined, and slavery and so on have been defined as evils of which only white people are capable of, and because of that, let's preserve and respect the cultures and religions of others.

Slavery in Mauritania and Saudi Arabia and in Sudan has hardly been addressed with the same vigor as slavery was addressed here in the United States, in Europe and -- you know, remember the evolution of apartheid, which is just one degree, probably, above -- if you compared its inhuman treatments -- one degree above slavery. There was a passionate movement against apartheid from the West, and it was because those atrocities were being committed by white people. You have a passionate movement, again, scrutinizing every little step that Israel makes to survive, because they are like us. But once they are not like us, then the moral standard goes very low. And I think that is reverse racism and I think that's terrible. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: What advice would you offer for Muslim women living in the West who suffer mistreatment from their husbands?

MS. HIRSI ALI: In "The Caged Virgin," I give Muslim women who really want to take advantage of the freedoms that the West gives them when they live in Western countries, I've given them 10 tips to follow, and they are the 10 tips that worked for me. And the first tip is to -- I'm not going to repeat all 10 of them, but the first one is to understand that once you -- first of all, to want that freedom badly, and to understand that once you are free, it doesn't mean that your problems are solved, that you leave the oppressive surroundings and the abusive surroundings of a husband or a clan or a family and you start off on your own, and that really means starting off on your own.

And many Muslim women find -- it's, they say, extremely difficult in Western countries to find vast alternatives, a social network, people that they can rely on, people that they can talk to about their worries. And so when I ask Muslim women to go for their freedom, I ask Western governments to enforce the law by going after the perpetrator and not abandoning the woman who's running away from violence; and then civil society, where they find these women, to stand them by.

MR. ZREMSKI: What is the appeal of Islam? It's the world's fastest-growing religion, gaining adherence throughout Europe, Africa and here in the U.S. Please tell us why you believe this to be the case.

MS. HIRSI ALI: Because Allah is the only god in town. (Laughter.) The Christians have stopped -- or at least have decreased their missionary work; atheists -- I'm an atheist, and I'm a liberal, so I can talk for and accept the criticism -- we are very lazy. We

don't go from door to door spreading liberalism. We don't go from door to door giving pamphlets in poor neighborhoods in Europe saying, "Will you please now start reading John Stuart Mill? Will you read Friedrich Hayek?" We don't do that. We don't think -- we say who's going to save you.

The Christians have been inhibited and don't do that because they believe that that's not something good to do. So the only people who are doing it now -- and I mean, really, a powerful movement who is doing that -- is Islam and the agents of Islam from Saudi Arabia to Tehran. They're investing a lot of money in Pakistan, in Indonesia, even in Latin America and in Europe. And if you sell your wares and you sell them convincingly, and you demonstrate -- and that is -- in fact, in many Muslim countries where the systems have failed, you have systems of corruption, radical Muslims demonstrate that the institutions that they set up are not correct, so that at first glance it seems that Islam is the answer and God is on their side. And I think that once there is competition, spiritual capitalism, then it's going to be far more difficult for only the Muslims to be winning the only hearts and minds of those people who are seeking religion. I can't help it, but multitudes of people are seeking God.

MR. ZREMSKI: There was a time centuries ago when Islamic civilization was among the world's most advanced. What happened?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I object to the assertion that Islam was ever a civilization and that it was very advanced. The Arab Muslims who founded Islam or who were good enough at fighting the Arab tribes -- who were, yes, perfect, absolutely, wonderful in fighting -- went and conquered land after land, empire after empire, but they did not bring civilization. Sometimes they destroyed civilization; sometimes they transformed it into Arab desert culture.

And that, I think, is where we have to start. Like, whenever was there a Muslim civilization? And it has to do with disagreement on how the term "civilization" is defined. But what we have seen since the seventh century and we see again recurring is the warlord mentality and the tribes and the large numbers, who are convinced that what they are doing in the name of God and for the hereafter is great. So it is possible for people in the name of Islam to conquer Europe, for instance, or the United States, but that doesn't mean they made a civilization. It just means they conquered it.

MR. ZREMSKI: We hear so much about the problems caused by Islamic belief. How do we solve that problem without damaging religious freedom? What's the ideal solution, and how can we implement it practically?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I think if we let go of the notion that all religions are equal, then we will understand why Islam as a set of ideas, not Muslims -- why Islam as a set of ideas is incompatible with civil society as it is formed here.

If you have Muslims, like Christians, like Jews, like atheists, living in the United States and they want to go about their business and they don't want to break the law and they don't want to replace the system with a system of Shari'a, then of course they have, and may

as well as anyone else enjoy, that freedom of religion.

On the other hand, if you have little kids being groomed in so-called Muslim schools, which to me are simply foundations or institutions of fascism -- groomed into hatred, are told not to ask questions, only to obey and be submissive.

Girls and boys are separated. Then, I think it's up to our lawmakers we have elected to review whether that sort of education for little children, who will become teenagers, who will become young adults and who will -- (inaudible) -- even though they are Americans, they are Europeans, have grown up in this system, will start fighting the system. I think it's up to us and those -- to review whether the system that is in place now can accommodate large numbers of Muslims or any other group that can be -- can erode democracy and civil society from within to that degree.

(Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: In light of your statement that Islam is not compatible with democracy, what should the United States do now about its attempt to instill a democracy in Iraq?

MS. HIRSI ALI: Send a huge army. (Laughter, laughs.)

I think I will -- I find it very difficult to answer questions regarding Iraq. Personally, I think the United States leaving at this stage is terrible because with all the loss of life and resources and the chance of many Iraqis still and the fact that the American government and the allied forces can help them, that it would be -- it would be very sad for America to go back now.

On the other hand, I think that Americans and the allies of America can and must convince Iraqis and other Arab Muslim nations that if they really want freedom that badly, they have to cooperate. You can't just be sending resources and the army and everyone and people there killing each other. I mean, if there is absolutely no cooperation, then I think we get into the quagmire that we are in now.

Again, there's another issue that people who -- or most people who address or comment on the Iraqi situation hardly ever address, and that is what about American interests in those countries? What about oil? Are we proposing a foreign policy whereby America has a huge army and just goes out there and grabs the oil that is necessary for its economy, or do you go and negotiate? What happens if negotiation doesn't help? I don't think that Saddam Hussein was someone who would comfortably sit at a table here and have that negotiation.

So there are many -- I think after 1989 what we've seen in the media and in academia is the proposal of a new foreign policy, a new world order, because the world is not in order now, and that hasn't been worked out yet. And it hasn't been worked out yet because of the inherent disagreement, to me sometimes very trivial, between parties such as Democrats and Republicans and left and right in Europe. These disagreements have been magnified to a degree that it has become almost impossible to talk rationally or to design any form of foreign policy, and I think that's a pity.

MR. ZREMSKI: Why did you say that you admire British Prime Minister Tony Blair? Don't you hold him at least partly accountable, like the majority of citizens in both the U.K. and the U.S., for the instability and chaos in Iraq?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I admire Tony Blair as a leader, especially as a European leader, because he puts a lot of effort into the transatlantic relationship.

The West without Europe -- America without Europe is weak; Europe without America is nothing. And I think that it's very important for both leaders to understand that in order to remain the West and to save Western civilization, whether we agree or disagree, we still need to cooperate. And I admire Tony Blair very, very much for strengthening those transatlantic ties. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: What are your thoughts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and can it be resolved?

(Laughter.)

MS. HIRSI ALI: Every time I'm asked this question, I think okay, I'll just concentrate on women and the position of women. (Laughter.)

The Israeli conflict -- Israeli-Palestinian conflict is defined by one group, the Israelis and the allies of Israel, as a territorial conflict that can be solved at the table. The other group -- or a majority of the other group has defined that conflict not as a territorial conflict, but as a religious conflict, as a conflict of identity. And there is the maxim within that group that as long as Israel is where Israel is, then no negotiation or no talks are possible. That's a terrible reality, but it's a reality that we have to face. And until and unless the other party is prepared to negotiate rationally on territory, that conflict will never be resolved.

The way things seem to be going, with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran saying that he wants to wipe Israel off the map, and working on a bomb to do that, the definition of the conflict is on the side of those who define it as ideology, as Islam -- as a value system. And we know from history that all value conflicts only can end in winners and losers. Personally, I don't want Israel to lose, but I think that that conflict today, looking at the reality of today, with Hamas as the elected government in place of the Palestinians, that it's not -- we are past -- and that's terrible to say, but it looks like we are past the moment when that situation could be resolved around the table.

MR. ZREMSKI: In your speech you mentioned the controversy about the Danish cartoons and the need to defend the freedom of the -- speech. Why is it important to be able to publish cartoons that are offensive or critical of an ethnic or religious group?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I'm not saying it cannot be offensive. It can be offensive. I'm offended all the time. (Laughter.)

(Chuckles.) I'm offended by what religious people write about atheists. I'm offended every time people say atheists are immoral and that morality is only -- religion is the only source of morality. I'm offended by that. But it is a legitimate opinion, and I can disagree with it, and I can present my disagreement in the way that we do in a civil society.

If, in the name of Mohammed, buildings are toppled, innocent people are killed, infrastructure is destroyed, people are beheaded, and a cartoonist in Denmark draws his head looking like a bomb, I think that it's not only funny, but I think that there's some truth to it as well. (Laughter.)

And what do cartoonists do? They draw. You can't just say, you know, "In the name of my prophet, I'm going to kill you, and I'm going to do all these atrocities." And those other people who share in that belief are silent when those atrocities take place. And then when a cartoonist does his job, then you say, "I want the head of the cartoonist." By doing that, you're only confirming what everyone else has been suspecting Islam and Mohammed to be. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: You mentioned in your speech the thought that journalists play a role in this entire debate. If you could just elaborate on that and tell us what more you think journalists can do on this issue, what stories should we be reporting that we're not reporting?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I think that journalists do a great job and that a lot of the changes that we have seen happen after the 11th of September have been the work of journalists. There are really great journalists. So it's not -- I'm not giving here a blanket criticism of all journalism.

But I think the decision, for instance, for Anglo-Saxon journalists not to reprint the cartoons, not to question the fact that Western symbols -- for instance, the American flag, or an effigy of the president of the United States or the pope -- that when they are tramped on in Arab Muslim countries, that we report that, and commentators just, you know, show -- and say these people who are doing that, they are displeased with them.

But what happens the other way around? What if, you know, you are to do the same with the Saudi flag that carries a sword? And I think that's one flag that should be trampled upon; I would love to do it. (Laughter.) It says there's no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet, and it's a warrior statement and it has a sword underneath. But if that happens, you have to observe, you know, the offense that will be caused. And I think that we journalists haven't been pointing to that.

The number of Christians killed in Muslim countries, the way they are oppressed -- I cannot live my religion in any Muslim country. I don't understand why journalists don't go into Muslim communities within the West, and also when reporting on Muslim countries, and show the reality -- lack of reciprocity.

MR. ZREMSKI: Now, a few more personal questions. Tell us how you feel about living in the United States.

MS. HIRSI ALI: I've been spending -- I live in the United States since September last year, and I spent most of my time at airports, hotels and airplanes. (Laughs; laughter.) And in between, what I have seen of America, I'm very, very, very pleased and very happy to be here. And I have to point out that I didn't come like the average immigrant from Mexico or the guy from Pakistan who's been illegal for 10 years here, and so on. So that makes it -- it's possible that my -- the circumstances that I have come to American in also makes me rosy-eyed. But what I have seen, what I have experienced up until now is warmth, hospitality, freedom. And I expected people to be fat and carry cowboy hats and guns. (Laughs; laughter.)

And I haven't seen any of that, which sort of disappoints the (thrill?). (Laughs; laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you feel that you're in perpetual danger because of what you say? And how much time do you end up having just thinking about that and dealing with that?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I don't -- I do think that I'm in danger once in a while. It doesn't obsess -- I'm not obsessed with it. In the United States I feel like I'm less under threat. But again, I also come from a background where people really die for what they believe in. I believe in life and I want to live, but I really believe in what I have to say, and I think that in America and in Europe, it should have been self-evident to be able to say what I say; which, by the way, none of it is original, it's already been said by more people, it's been written before even I was born.

So I don't live -- I try not to live in fear and I try to live life to the fullest. But I really seriously believe that Islam is a threat to the West. And I, as a woman, have benefited a great deal from the West, and I know exactly what I'm fighting for and I know precisely what I'm fighting against. And that takes away the fear.

MR. ZREMSKI: How do you feel about the public furor in the Netherlands over your asylum application, which resulted in your resignation from the Dutch Parliament? Was it justified? And did your contact contribute to the furor at all?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I love the Netherlands and I love everything that Holland has given me. And even though a lot -- when I went into politics, a lot of people disagreed with me, when I started to write op-ed pieces, a lot of people disagreed with me, but when just one woman in the government decided to nullify my citizenship, there was a passionate rejection of what she did. And that's, I think, what you call commotion.

And that has only strengthened me in the -- the Netherlands is a very, very tolerant, very, very civilized place, and it hurts me every time that people write down that Holland is becoming more intolerant and more racist, which is not the case.

It just shows that people who may have disagreed with me now defend me against losing my citizenship. That's how I translated that furor.

Did my conduct contribute to it? There wasn't much time to display any conduct, because the day that the minister of immigration and integration said she will nullify my citizenship, on the same day, there was a parliamentary debate, and the furor had already started. So yeah, I didn't contribute much to it, but I'm still and remain very grateful to the Netherlands.

MR. ZREMSKI: You've mentioned several times now that you now consider yourself an atheist. Why is that?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I think for any of you who has read my book or read anything about me, the God that I was brought up with is a ferocious, aggressive God, who in detail works out, is very totalitarian, works out in detail how I should leave my life and denies me all that I now consider to be my basic rights. Having left that God, I think, dear Americans, you understand that I'm not really tempted to go back into the fear and what I consider the irrationality of a hereafter, hell and heaven, angels and spirits and gardens and snakes and apples and -- I think I'll just concentrate on reading that which I think is consistent, at least where there is some evidence for it. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: One of our guests writes, I admire your ability and clarity of mind and spirit to know that your mother's anger wasn't directed toward you. How did you know or learn this?

MS. HIRSI ALI: You know. You know it. You know it as a child. When you are punished for something that you've done, and the system of punishment is different from here, so hitting children is an accepted method of raising and grooming children. But I always knew when it was -- when my mother hit me it was related to something I did or did not do, and when it wasn't related to any of that.

I have no resentment whatsoever to her. And I think that I do that because she is my mother and I love her very much and I understand what she was doing in her circumstances.

I don't condone it, and I don't think that my mother is an example to other mothers. But I have -- and my mother has been an example to me in the sense that I think I don't want to repeat that life, and that had stimulated me to run away from the life that was designed for me because I feared it would look like hers. And also, I figured that if you take such a huge step in saying I want to give shape to my life and I want freedom, there's no point in leaving a physical prison and getting yourself into a mental prison of resentment. And so I thought I'll free myself of that.

MR. ZREMSKI: We are almost out of time. But before I ask the last question, we just have a couple of important matters to take care of.

First of all, let me remind our guests of our future speakers. On June 25th, Chad Holliday, the chairman of the Council for Competitiveness and the chairman of the board and chief executive

officer of DuPont will be with us. The next day, the 26th, Lou Dobbs, anchor and managing editor of CNN's "Lou Dobbs Tonight" will be joining us to talk about politics and the economy. And on July 18th, John Snow, chairman of Cerberus Capital Management and former Treasury secretary, will be with us.

Next, as I've been saying all day, this is a place of many traditions, and one is that we give all our speakers a plaque. (Applause.)

MS. HIRSI ALI: Thank you very much.

MR. ZREMSKI: And the other is that we will give something that you will not give you at the press club in the Netherlands, the National Press Club mug. (Laughter.)

MS. HIRSI ALI: (Laughs.) Thank you very much.

MR. ZREMSKI: Sure. Thank you. (Applause.)

MS. HIRSI ALI: Thank you.

MR. ZREMSKI: Sure.

The last question. I'm always struck when I see news reports out of the Middle East of how often I see images of young teenage boys in the Arab world and the fact that I never see the girls. And I just wondered, if you had one thing you would like to say to those girls that we don't see, what that would be.

MS. HIRSI ALI: You mean you want me to engage in wishful thinking, like we've been doing all here?

Well, if I engaged in wishful thinking, and I would have any of those girls, I would say regardless of your circumstances, if you have the possibility, learn to read and write. Try as much as you can. If you can run away, that's one way of doing it. If you can manipulate your own circumstances, that is another way. If you can find within your environment someone who will help you do that, become financially independent, because with that, with education and financial independence, as a woman, regardless of where you are, you're very, very powerful.

If you become a mother, realize that we make boys as mothers. And in the Middle East and in Arab Islamic countries, often it's women who oppress other women. And if you have liberated yourself from that oppression, make sure that the boys are brought up in a way that they understand and respect women, and not like the Australian imam, who is now very, very famous, said he considered women to be red meat and men wild dogs.

And I think that women can make that change, and that's what terrifies the mullahs out of their wits.

Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much. (Continued applause.)

Thank you very much. I'd like to thank everyone for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booze and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also, thanks to the NPC Library for its research. The video archive of today's luncheon is provided by the National Press Club's Broadcast Operations Center. Press Club members can access free transcripts of our luncheons at our website, www.press.org, and non-members can purchase transcripts, audio and videotapes by calling 1-888-343-1940.

Thank you. We're adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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