Andrew C. Weber Discusses U.S. Efforts to Eradicate Weapons of Mass Destruction

On Thursday, March 27th, 2014 at 4:30PM in Lewis Auditorium, Goldwin Smith Hall, Andrew C. Weber, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense Programs and Cornell alum, gave a talk entitled “Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction.” The talk was part of the Einaudi Center’s ongoing Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series.

After a brief introduction from Einaudi Center Director and Vice Provost for International Affairs Fredrik Logevall, Weber framed his discussion by displaying a quote from President Obama at the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Symposium: “We simply cannot allow the 21st century to be darkened by the worst weapons of the 20th century.”

The emphasis that President Obama has recently placed on deterring threats has taken a particular focus on biological threats, according to Weber. The administration is particularly concerned about the potential impact that non-state actors could have with biological weapons of mass destruction due to the ease of accessibility of ingredients, as showcased in the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway during the 1990s. Weber also acknowledged that Al Qaeda “had established a bioterrorism program and even put out a call for brothers with degrees in microbiology or chemistry to develop weapons of mass destruction.”

Weber highlighted Obama’s stance further by noting that the emphasis was on “countering biological threats, not just biological terrorism, since it intrinsically encompasses natural biological threats to human health.” Weber noted that a large part of his job was the “healthification of security,” stating that he hoped to dispel the belief that defense projects are not heavily intertwined with health initiatives. According to Weber, future biological threat detection systems will act somewhat like weather forecast systems, allowing states to predict outbreak patterns digitally.

Weber then went on to describe in detail some of the various projects and threat reduction missions he had been a part of throughout his extensive career. As part of “Project Sapphire” in
Kazakhstan (1994), Weber had worked with the local government there to transport 600 kilograms of enriched uranium from holding centers to an airport via a secret mission, after which the products were flown back to the U.S. for disposal services. The mission was referred to as a “pre-emptive acquisition” by Weber.

In Libya, Weber had been a part of a mission that begun in 2003 in charge of freeing the country of all weapons of mass destruction. The project was completed in a remote part of Libya about 500 kilometers into their main desert region. While all known stocks had been cleared much earlier, Weber stated that the mission was made more difficult by the discovery of previously undeclared chemical weapons caches, which forced those doing the work on the ground to be far more diligent in their search and pursuit of the weapons.

Lastly, Weber discussed his most recent project, the efforts to completely destroy Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile. While much of the public would believe that the effort was a spontaneous and recent one, Weber noted that “we had been working on it for over three years.” Meetings with Russia had established a baseline for chemical weapons destruction in 2012, leading to a joint effort in the mission in Syria. In working with local partners in the region, the U.S. had estimated that the most cost effective and safe way to destroy the weapons would be the utilization of a vessel stationed near the coast which would utilize a “Field Deployable Hydrolysis System.” According to Weber, the process should be complete in April of 2014.

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell University led by the Einaudi Center to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell's outstanding resources in this area.