

Yale professor talks of threats to America

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Anyone harboring optimism about the state of world affairs prior to attending Paul Kennedy's Friday seminar probably walked away thinking the glass is half-empty.

The Nebraska Public Policy Center hosted the Yale history professor and author's visit at the Wick Alumni Center, where he gave a presentation titled "The Conundrum of American Power in Today's Fragmented World."

Combining historical perspective and political analysis, Kennedy discussed the major long-term threats facing America and the world — threats for which, he argued, America is woefully unprepared or unwilling to address.

Kennedy began by arguing that America's global military power is historically unprecedented, but is not well oriented to deal with the threats of the future.

He said current threats come from independent organizations such as terrorist groups, not nation-states, so military toys such as aircraft carrier fleets are not an efficient way to spend money. The military maintains 14 such fleets.

"I came up with a rough estimate of one carrier task group at \$28 billion," Kennedy said. "That's the entire defense budget of the Republic of Italy, and she's not alone."

America would be wiser, he said, to start preparing for trends that are likely to cause problems in the long term. Drastically rising population rates in developing countries — combined with an ever-growing global income disparity due to lack of economic progress in the third world — could produce dramatic increases in the number of failed states where terrorism and war thrive.

Kennedy said without some plan to ensure the economic viability of developing countries, a bad situation was inevitable.

"(Citizens of impoverished countries) will be wandering around in the streets in a way not unlike the Gaza Strip," Kennedy said. "Pakistan just simply cannot go from 145 million to 344 million (in the next 50 years) without complete social collapse."

He said if the United States decided to devote a small portion of its current military budget to effectively distributed foreign aid, the economic benefits for developing nations could be staggering, and the world would be safer for it.

America spends the least amount of its gross domestic product on foreign aid than any other developed nation, and the majority of what is spent goes to military aid for Egypt and Israel, he said.

Kennedy's speech was followed later in the day by a panel discussion with Kennedy and UNL professors from the history, political science and economics departments. The panel focused on threats to global stability. Kennedy improvised a title for the talk, calling it "choose your nightmare."

"If there's a bar around the corner where we can get a good stiff scotch when this is over we might need one," Kennedy said.

Although the range of topics during the panel discussion was wide, the professors all agreed major changes were necessary on the part of the United States to gain the legitimacy it needs for effective global leverage.

"Legitimacy and consent seem to have fallen out of the picture for the last four years," said political science associate professor David Rapkin. "This administration regards with contempt that an effort to gain and maintain global legitimacy is necessary."

Kurt Hall, a senior broadcasting major at UNL, said he left the event feeling less than optimistic.

"Nuclear proliferation was probably the scariest thing they talked about, but it all sounded pretty bad," Hall said.