

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Dayton Peace Accords Series

REPRESENTATIVE MICHAEL R. TURNER

*Interviewed by: Ambassador (ret.) Anne Patterson
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Mike Turner served as the 53rd Mayor of the City of Dayton (1994-2002) during the Dayton Peace Accords negotiations. He currently serves as U.S. Representative for Ohio's 10th congressional district.

INTERVIEW

Q: Congressman Turner, as I got into this issue, I was increasingly struck with the importance of this May event for the NATO Parliamentary Assembly held in Dayton, Ohio, because it comes at a critical time in U.S.-European relations for the NATO alliance and perhaps for the future of Ukraine itself. It's an extraordinarily important event for you and our country. We're very pleased to have you talk about the history of the Dayton Accords, how it influenced your role in national security, and its importance for the country going forward.

TURNER: Well, I think you're absolutely right. I appreciate that you've given it that focus because it's not just the issue of how to end a war, but it's also building democratic institutions and how to go from conflict to maintaining peace. And those certainly are important issues that we have right now. And quite frankly, if you look at Srebrenica and the unbelievable atrocities that occurred there, and that you look at what's happened in Mariupol and in Ukraine, it is a fine dotted line, and it is the same forces at play. And whether it be what was occurring in the Balkans or whether it's occurring now, we can see those same forces. And I think there are lessons to be learned and lessons to be applied that I think can tell us what our responsibilities are and what we need to be doing.

Q: Congressman, you were Mayor of Dayton and, like every other American, you must have seen Christiane Amanpour's reports from Sarajevo and Srebrenica on the atrocities and the shock this caused for Americans, because it was not in Algeria or some far-off place that she also reported on; it was in the heart of Europe and really a replay of what most Americans thought was a period that was over and done with. So, as mayor of Dayton, how did you react to that? And how did you react when you heard that Dayton was going to be the location for the peace talks?

TURNER: I think what's really interesting also—and to give you some contrast of what

was happening there in the Balkans versus also Ukraine—what occurred in the Balkans really took President Clinton and the United States to step up to the plate, to push Europe to end the conflict. Europe had sort of turned its back on the Balkans and to the atrocities that were occurring. And the 100,000 people that were dying in Sarajevo, where the Olympics had occurred, where people really saw this as part of Europe, until the conflict had occurred. But in Ukraine, people, even though Europe was slow to respond, Europe was paying attention, and Europe was engaged. The United States was part of Europe's engagement in trying to respond to Russia's aggression. So in that, there is some difference that is occurring there. And I think that certainly is important. But when the announcement was made that this was coming to Dayton, my community certainly saw the importance of what was going to happen, that peace needed to occur here.

Q: And the reaction of the community, I've read that there were demonstrations of school children in front of the location, in front of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and children sending notes to the participants. How did the community respond to this, and how did you, as mayor, and your municipal office support this?

TURNER: Well, in part, the reason why Wright-Patterson Air Force Base was chosen, at least it was stated, is because it is enclosed. It is almost a city within itself. So, it could occur within the base itself. Even though they did come outside of the base and engage in the city, they went to restaurants, and there are stories of them shopping in town. They really weren't engaged in the city itself. But the community did see the importance of it occurring there. And as you said, the community was engaged spiritually in a way of saying they wanted to support what was occurring.

Q: Congressman, I saw a very moving video about the reaction of the community and the people that have traveled back and forth. And you were instrumental in the implementation of the Dayton Accords and to strengthen the ties between Bosnia, and other countries as well, with your travels with Commerce Secretary Mickey Kantor and to develop ties on infrastructure and culture and a whole range of issues that lasted over quite a lengthy period of time as your city supported the implementation of the peace agreement.

TURNER: And those ties still remain. You know, this was a part that was really important with the Clinton administration that they were very committed to, and that was the building of democratic institutions. It was not just that there was a peace agreement and that the peace would just hold. They really made a commitment long-term to the building of democratic institutions. They saw that with the engagement that was to occur. And they engaged the Dayton community. They saw that through having exchanges that occurred in part through USAID. They twinned our community. They also twinned our chamber, our universities, our philharmonics, our symphonies twinned, and our cities twinned so that our transportation systems, our police departments, our infrastructures, water departments and the like, so that we exchanged between the two technical expertise, how the infrastructure and democratic institutions could be used to help build the municipalities and democratic institutions.

Q: So, one of the main issues in all the implementation of these peace accords is security. Could you talk for a minute about the police exchanges and how those worked, and training up a police force that was essentially nonpartisan and not beholden to any ethnic unit?

TURNER: Right, so they had to build up, for example, in Sarajevo itself, they had to build up a police force. So their homicide detectives came and trained with our homicide detectives. And that was, you know, in our community, it was very rewarding to be part of those exchanges. I think it also helped our community to be part of those exchanges. We learned as they learned, also in part from those exchanges.

Q: So when you went there, what was the reaction of the people when you talked to them? Do you have any anecdotes to share? How were you and the other citizens of Dayton received?

TURNER: Well, very well. I mean, first off, there was the symbolism of Dayton itself. I mean, Dayton to them was not just a city or a place. It had become a destination. It became the symbol of peace. But people also had their relationships with the concept of both the conflict that had occurred and the transition to building democratic institutions.

I stayed in the home of one family, a gentleman whose name was Dusan Kalambar, who was an attorney, who had actually been in Arkansas when Clinton had been governor of Arkansas. And he had met Clinton as governor. As governor, he had given him a certificate where he declared him an Arkansas ambassador. And he was so touched that, as president, as he declared it, he had saved his family by bringing peace to the Balkans after there had been war. And it was so important to him that a man whose hand he had shaken had brought peace to the area. And he'd asked that I tell that story to President Clinton. He gave me a copy of the certificate of the Arkansas ambassadorship that he had received. I went to the White House. I told Bill Clinton that story, and he was touched to hear it. Actually, he wrote Mr. Kalambar a letter thanking him for hearing the story. Those types of personal connections really meant a lot in the Balkans, and I think really contributed to that transition of, you know, peace is coming, it's going to last, they're making the transition.

Q: So, there was a lot going on in the world at this time. There was the fall of the Soviet Union, there was unification, there was a lot of turmoil in other places in the world. Did you feel like you got a lot of support on the implementation and the Clinton administration's support for democratic institutions? Did you feel like there was sustained support for the Dayton Peace Accords?

TURNER: I mean, absolutely. They saw the importance. And it was, you know, there was certainly a significant military presence. So they had made that commitment. And then on top of it, there was the significant USAID building democratic institutions, and then the social fabric exchange of building those community relationships and exchanges, both in universities, universities were twinning, a significant commitment to knitting together opportunities for people to have those community exchanges.

Q: One question that I wanted to ask is, well, you're a major expert now on America's national defense issues. How did your experience with the Dayton Peace Accords, your travels in the region, and your support for building democratic institutions influence your personal interest in national security?

TURNER: Well, significantly because it also showed that this is a process, that this is a journey. We made a mistake. We saw the fall of the Berlin Wall, and we thought that the world had transformed, and it has not. For example, you know, with Russia, there was not this transformation. They did not take down the Berlin Wall. They merely didn't shoot the people who were doing so. And so the transformation had not fully occurred, and that's how you still have these conflicts that are occurring along the way. The transition to democracy has to continue through the building of these institutions and the holding of areas to prevent conflict. And that has to both be militarily building both governments that are stable, and these institutions beyond just the governments themselves, where there can be democratic dialogues and institutions that can support the populations that can engage in democratic dialogues. That process, I think, is ongoing, and I think the EU and NATO are those institutions by which we then incorporate those nations as they make that journey.

Q: So, Congressman, I think some people would say that what happened there is almost unique because you did have the support of EU and NATO, and there are other conflicts in the world that seem to recur over and over as areas of human suffering like Haiti or Sudan that just seem to go on forever with no resolution, where you can't build these democratic institutions. What do you think was the key there? Was it the support from the Europeans? Was it sustained American leadership? Because that seems really key to me in the situation in the Balkans.

TURNER: Well, the Balkan conflict is not over. I mean, we're seeing right now, we've not had...

Q: Some redress...

TURNER: Right, we actually took our eye off the ball there. And largely because the international community did not stay engaged. We moved on to areas that perhaps were a little easier. Bosnia itself, if the international community had remained engaged, might have been completed. The problem with Bosnia itself is that the constitution with the Dayton Peace Accords was not one that was meant to be permanent and provide for permanent governance. And instead of the international community remaining engaged and assisting in a transition, which we should have done, and both the United States and the EU and the international community remaining engaged, we sort of wagged our finger at them and said now you make the transition, but they were really not capable of doing it themselves. Without our engagement, they remain struggling, and unfortunately, today, we even see the verge of the threat of conflict.

Q: Is the fact that the peace accords were held in a medium-sized U.S. town like Dayton

and that you could develop these linkages also very important? Because most of these peace negotiations are held in places like Vienna or Geneva, or where there's this big amorphous sort of peace construct that carries people forward. What do you think the city of Dayton and the people of Dayton contributed to this? And should this be a model that we should look at for other peace negotiations, to do them in smaller places, and frankly, with really, really intensive U.S. leadership like we saw in Dayton?

TURNER: Well, what you certainly have is a community that has a focus. I mean, we embraced this as a cause, and I think that speaks both well of our community and certainly the time, and the fact that the administration gave us that opportunity.

Q: And the lessons from Dayton, what do you think, what lessons can we take away from Dayton, and when you talk to your counterparts in May, and you all revisit some of the lessons and try to develop lessons for the future, what are you gonna talk about? What will you say are the future lessons that you can take away from Dayton?

TURNER: Well, it really takes a coordinated approach. You can't bring peace with just military action. You can't bring peace with just a negotiated approach. I mean, you have to have all of the tools of a diplomatic approach and building democratic institutions. But the fact that it has stalled in this area, I think, is because we took our eye off the ball. You do have to remain committed, and you have to remain committed as a partner in the area and the region to get the job done, and we haven't done that yet.

Q: When you have these meetings in May, and you meet with counterparts from all over the world, and now the Finns and the Swedes are also involved in this as well. What lessons do you see for Ukraine, for the resolution of the situation in Ukraine, from this meeting in May?

TURNER: Well, I think we have to be resolved and understand that there will always be those who want to undermine the self-determination of peoples. We can't allow those from the outside to look into nations that are democratically elected governing nations and say that they get a choice, that they get to decide, that they have some ability to undermine them that it really does matter to us, that it undermines us all, that once we say that one nation doesn't have an ability to have its own self-determination and sovereignty, that we weaken actually the ability for all of us to have that choice. And that's worth standing up for.

Q: And the idea also that we can assist in building democratic institutions in Ukraine, a country that has had its ups and downs on its path to democracy, of course, that also will require a sustained commitment...

TURNER: Absolutely.

Q: And not insignificant funds either.

TURNER: Absolutely, and they're worth doing, and it takes it on a coordinated fashion,

takes all of us. And it takes it in both, you know, economic, in education systems, judicial systems. It takes it in municipal and infrastructure systems. It takes it in areas of governance. It takes it in societal systems. It is not just the issue of the ballot box; it is how does the society fit together in pieces to be able to have the enjoyment of governance.

Q: How are the people of Dayton reacting to the event in May?

TURNER: Well, they're very excited because...

Q: No bad traffic...

TURNER: Right...they understand this is a very large undertaking, and they understand, of course, that it is a retrospective of what occurred and a prospective of the responsibility of really the reflection of it. At Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, there are 30,000 people inside the fence every day that contribute to national security, and they are both preventing the conflicts that could occur and affecting the conflicts that are occurring today.

Q: I do want to ask some personal questions, if you don't mind. How did you decide to run for mayor of Dayton? And what was your educational background?

TURNER: Well, our city had gone through several crises. The city, financially, wasn't doing very well. Our downtown and neighborhoods were not doing very well. There were some great opportunities for economic development and revitalizing the community, and I thought there was an opportunity to make some change, which ultimately we were able to do.

Q: And you'd grown up there?

TURNER: Yes.

Q: And your parents were both from there.

TURNER: Yes.

Q: And could you talk a little about your educational background?

TURNER: I was a lawyer in town, and I was doing real estate development. And I thought that from the work that I was doing, I might be able to make an impact. I had been working in nonprofit economic development and commercial economic development. I was elected in a town that's nine percent Republican. I was a Republican. We came in; we were able to balance the city's budget in nine months, which had not been balanced in five years. We transformed the downtown and began neighborhood revitalization. And today, the city is a town that I think has regained its spirit and is on the upswing.

Q: And did the Dayton Accords contribute to this, inspire this? Did they support economic development? They certainly got it on the map. I know they were isolated in Wright-Patterson, but they put the city on the map. Everyone in the country had heard about Dayton then.

TURNER: Well, I think at the time, we were a community that was regaining our spirit and reclaiming our downtown, and Wright-Patterson Air Force Base had not really been completely integrated into the community. We knew that Wright-Patterson Air Force Base had an opportunity for growth. It has since doubled in size. There was an international focus on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base with the Dayton Peace Accords. And I think that also helped bring attention to the opportunity for Wright-Patterson Air Force Base that today has now, I think, grown into.

Q: And your education, you came to Congress, you ran for Congress, and then you got a doctorate from Georgetown.

TURNER: Right.

Q: While you were in Congress?

TURNER: Yes. So my practice here in Congress has largely been in national security. And because I had practiced as a mayor in the area of urban economic development, I wanted to re-engage on the urban side. So I went to Georgetown in their doctorate of liberal studies and re-engaged in the area of urban economic development. I received my doctorate in liberal studies with a focus in urban economic development.

Q: But that must have been a huge, I mean, a very significant effort to have a full-time job and then go to school.

TURNER: Yeah, it was very worth it because I took some of the work that I had done addressing some of the issues in my community and looked to some of the research that had been already accomplished nationally and some of the problems that we face in urban America and looked at, well, what can we do to try to change urban America? How can we re-attract capital back to the urban core? How can we look to attracting diverse economic, diverse populations back to the urban core?

Q: And that's happened in Dayton?

TURNER: I believe we have done that.

Q: And how have the demographics of the city shifted over the years, like many cities in this country? How has that shifted, and has that made a difference?

TURNER: I think our city is much different than it was twenty-five, thirty years ago. If you come into our downtown, we're a very stable city. We are looking, I think, to a future

that is much more economically diverse.

End of interview