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Conference on World Affairs preview: What do we need in a president?

Highest oath is commitment to a nation's values

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National security expert Mark Fallon made it through an interview concerning a panel discussion he'll participate in at the World Affairs Conference on Monday titled "What We Need in a President" without mentioning a current candidate by name.

But when asked about Republican frontrunner Donald Trump's endorsement of torture as a viable tool in the battle against global terrorism, he sounded like a man who has been paying attention.

"I will say that type of rhetoric is highly irresponsible," said Fallon, who will make appearances at nine different conference panels or presentations this week. "It is inconsistent with the Eighth Amendment, it is inconsistent with the United States code, it is inconsistent with Article 3 (of the European Convention on Human Rights), and the Geneva Conventions."

He wasn't finished.

"The rhetoric I'm hearing now from some candidates is unlawful, as well as ineffective and immoral. It's clearly unlawful, so they are either misinformed, uninformed or well informed and consciously making a decision to articulate an unlawful position. Any of those are all troubling to me."

But Fallon doesn't describe himself as a political pundit, and does not involve himself directly in politics. So count Fallon as one more conference panelist who has found himself assigned to a session that may not align directly with his sweet spot.

"When I was asked to do this panel, I was actually a little hesitant," Fallon admitted. "Politics is not my area. I don't belong to either party."

One charm of the University of Colorado's Conference on World Affairs is that panels are often populated with participants who might have little direct expertise on the subject at hand — but will expound on it anyway, often with insightful, or at least amusing, results.

Rob Warden, executive director emeritus and co-founder of the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University, assumed a reporter was contacting him to talk about the panel he'll be appearing on earlier Monday, concerning wrongful convictions.

As for the question of what we need in a president, he nearly sputtered, "I didn't realize... I hadn't...I didn't....yeah."

Regaining his footing, he quipped, "After Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, what do we need in a president? Who is not qualified?"

Warden added, "My main area is wrongful convictions and the death penalty. Those are things that I genuinely know a lot about and can talk about. The one I've been doing a little research on is male socialization and violence, on Wednesday. I hope that by then I have something that doesn't make me look like an utter dunderhead."

Warden is a first-time participant, but was a longtime friend of the late Roger Ebert, host for many years of the popular conference staple, the Cinema Interruptus featured movie.

And although admittedly not fully prepped to talk presidential prerequisites, Warden launched into a lengthy and eloquent sketch of the battle between Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton and her challenger, Sen. Bernie Sanders.

Almost without pausing for breath, Warden sketched out the reasons many Democrats are leery of Clinton, focusing more on her foreign policy record than her ties to Wall Street, riffed on the wisdom of Sanders' support for making higher education and health care more affordable — but agreeing with those who say "his numbers don't add up" — and emphasized how much good could actually be funded with an added gasoline tax and by also pouring less of the national treasury into the military industrial complex that President Dwight Eisenhower warned against at the end of his time in office.

Warden was more succinct in summing up what he is seeing on the Republican side of the aisle in the 2016 campaign, terming it, "Pathetic."

In his long career in national security, Fallon has grown familiar with the ways of Al Qaeda, and learned about the concept of "bayat," the vow of allegiance jihadists were forced to make to Osama bin Laden and his successors

By contrast, Fallon said, "Our leader takes an oath to the Constitution of the U.S., for what it embodies for what it stands for, the founding principles of our founding fathers. Right from Day 1 before they take office, they put their hands on the Bible and swear or affirm a pledge, a sacred oath, to the Constitution of the U.S., to protect the Constitution from all enemies foreign and domestic.

"That is not something to take lightly. I took that oath and sold myself to the Constitution and the values that thing stands for. And that is what a presidential candidate, when elected, will have to do."

Additional panelists who will explore what we need in a president will be Malou Innocent, an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, and Aruna Kalyanam, who has been on the staff of the House Ways and Means Committee since 2001.