

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Brookings Cafeteria Podcast: America's role in protecting the global order

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(MUSIC)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. Today's show features a fascinating conversation between two senior fellows at Brookings, Bob Kagan and E.J. Dionne, on Kagan's new book, "The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World." But as you'll soon hear, the conversation is about so much more than this important book.

Kagan and Dionne's conversation ranges from American involvement in World War I, to Vietnam and the Iraq War, and to the economic challenges facing our world today. It's on the longer side for the show, but I hope you'll stick with it, it's worth it.

Kagan is the Stephen and Barbara Friedman Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy, and author of numerous books and articles on U.S. foreign policy. You can also hear him in a recent episode of our Intersections podcast, also from the Brookings Podcast Network. Dionne, a senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings, is also a syndicated columnist for *The Washington Post*, and author and editor of numerous books on U.S. politics, civil society, and religion and politics. His latest book is "One Nation after Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not Yet Deported" with Norm Ornstein and Thomas Mann.

Also on today's show, our regular Metro Lens segment. In this edition, Rubenstein Fellow Andre Perry talks about black women's electoral strength in an era of fractured politics.

Just a reminder that you can follow the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all of our shows. And an announcement: you can listen to Brookings Podcasts on Spotify. If you have any questions for me, or for the scholars who appear on the show, send your emails to BCP@Brookings.edu. And now on with the show. Here's E.J. Dionne.

DIONNE: Thank you, Fred. It's great to be here with my Brookings Institution

colleague Bob Kagan. The occasion for our talk is his new book “The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World.” I have to say it's a real joy to be here with Bob. He's someone I haven't always agreed with, nor has he always agreed with me, but he is a delightful person, and a clear thinker, and we do agree on the importance of democracy. And even those who are out there who may have disagreed with Bob in the past should know he's a heck of a guy to have dinner with and kick things around with. So what we're going to try to do today is have a kind of dinner table conversation about foreign policy and where things stand now for the U.S. and what is the future of U.S. power in the world. It's really good to be with you, Bob.

KAGAN: Well it's a treat for me, E.J. It's always a pleasure to read you and to talk with you, and also to have dinner with you.

DIONNE: Bless you for that! Now before we lose all our audience, I'll get to the substance. The book is called “The Jungle Grows Back,” and for a split second when I saw that title I thought, “My God, has Bob Kagan become an environmentalist? What's he doing writing about jungles!” So why don't you just start by giving listeners a sense of the argument of your book which is pretty clear and straightforward. And by the way, the book is written in a very clear and straightforward way.

KAGAN: Well thanks a lot. Yeah, I mean the metaphor is...for any of the folks out there I'm not a good gardener, and I haven't done much gardening, but I understand the general principle...

DIONNE: I have a black thumb myself.

KAGAN: Anyone who's ever gardened knows that first of all a garden is an artificial construct that human beings build, it's not a natural phenomenon. And once you've planted a garden your job is not finished. You have to weed it. You have to cut back the vines, you have to prevent the jungle from going back over it because the forces of nature are always seeking to undermine and overgrow a garden. And for me, that's the metaphor for what we

call, for lack of a better phrase, “the liberal world order” that was created largely by the United States and American policies after World War II.

We can think of all the horrible things that have happened over the past 70-75 years, and many horrible things have happened, but if you compare this period to the rest of human history, it's been a remarkable period. We've seen the most global prosperity that we've seen in any other time in history. Most people throughout history have been in abject poverty, and what we've seen since World War II is something like an average of four percent annual GDP growth globally, and not just obviously in the West, but in China and India and Latin America and elsewhere. In addition of course we've seen an incredible explosion of democracy. Democracy is the rarest form of government. It's almost an accident in the rest of history, and yet we've seen this has been a remarkably democratic world. And undergirding all this has been a long period, perhaps the longest that anyone can think of, of great power peace. Now there have been wars, wars that the United States has been involved with obviously, but the kind of cataclysmic world wars that we saw twice in the first half of the 20th century have not been present.

So this, in my view, is like it's almost a miracle, it's a unique situation, it's an aberration in the same way that a garden is. And what we have to understand is, this order, this generally positive international system doesn't just stay there. It requires constant efforts to beat back inherent forces in human nature that seek to destroy it. So the international system is normally chaotic and conflictual, and human nature does not simply support democracy, as I think you would agree.

DIONNE: I think democracy is hard to build, although I do think there are aspects of it that are natural. *The Economist* had a great review of your book, said that the one thing that they sort of had doubts about was they said you didn't take the power of ideas seriously because you took power so seriously. What do you say to the editors of *The Economist* other than, “thanks for a great review.”

KAGAN: Well I do think it was a very nice review and I'm really grateful for it. But no, I take ideas seriously; my argument is that ideas that aren't backed by power don't have to win. Now I agree that there are fundamental elements of human nature that do seek freedom, individual rights, respect, as you know, as Frank Fukuyama argued back in his essay "The End of History" twenty years ago. But I think there are clearly also other elements of human nature, which are equally powerful, which leads people to seek security in tribe, in family, in nation, which sometimes harkens for an authoritarian, a strong figure to provide protection and leadership, and we see that all around the world today, including in some places where we thought democracy had taken root.

My only point is that it's a constant struggle. We have this idea we're very much "children of the Enlightenment" in this respect. We have this idea of progress, and this idea that history moves in a certain direction, and our belief is that history moves in the direction of democracy. My view is that it's a constant struggle. Democracy can win when backed by sufficient commitment and power, but it can also lose. And anyone sitting around in 1939 would not have said democracy is the wave of the future.

DIONNE: I want to go back to the World War II period, but you raised the Enlightenment, and I think one of the interesting arguments you make in the book that actually might put you closer to some of your critics on the left than some of your old friends on the right, is your view of the American founding and what helped create this long period of democratization. We started out less democratic, but moved in the right direction over a long period of time. And you make a really strong point that we were not founded on Judeo-Christian ideas, but we were founded on Enlightenment ideas. And you have some really tough things to say toward the end of the book, that it was in avowedly Christian nations with Christian monarchs and established churches that the modern police state took root in the 19th century, and it was in the Christian West that democracy collapsed after World War I and so on. Could you talk about why it's important to your argument to

root our founding in the Enlightenment rather than in Judeo-Christian or other kinds of ideas?

KAGAN: Yeah well I appreciate your taking note of that argument because I think it's important, and it's partly important and we can talk about this later, because of the sort of dispute about what American nationalism means. There are those who see American nationalism as a fundamentally white, Protestant nationalism as opposed to the sort of Universalist nationalism that you find in the Declaration of Independence. But I make the point that there is, especially I think on the conservative side, this conviction that democracy can only flourish in Judeo-Christian societies, in what we call the West, the Western Civilization. We shouldn't be trying to promote it in places where we don't have Judeo-Christian values in already, and traditions. And my argument is, what makes us think the Judeo-Christian tradition guarantees democracy? It's all part of making the point that democracy is a struggle everywhere. It's a struggle that can be won everywhere and it's a struggle that can be and has been lost everywhere as well. And I think that what makes America unique, and this is getting to your question, is precisely that it is really the only country that is founded as a nation on these Enlightenment principles. France adopted these Enlightenment principles after the French Revolution, but of course there was a France before the Revolution and there could be France after the Revolution so to speak, whereas in the United States there really is no other concept of what it means to be an American other than the declaration, the principles of declaration. I think a lot of people in America have lost sight of that fact.

DIONNE: I am also a big fan of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution which I think also lays out the purposes of the nation again in a way that has no reference to blood, soil, lineage, religion. God does not appear in our Constitution, which there are stories that Benjamin Franklin said "Oh my god, we forgot God." He wrote that, I can't tell whether that's apocryphal or not, but it does sound like something Ben Franklin might have said.

And just parenthetically, I don't know your feelings about this. I'm a skeptic of the term Judeo-Christian or Abrahamic because I don't like denying the specificity of each faith, I think they are political constructs. In certain ways they were useful political constructs when they were trying to promote tolerance and openness, but they are still more political than religious constructs.

KAGAN: I think that's absolutely right.

DIONNE: Let's go back to World War I and the period after. It's possible this is an area where we disagree. I have always been a World War I skeptic. I'm worried very much. We look back in history and ask the question, would the world have been better off and would the United States have been better off if we had not intervened in that war, and if we had not intervened in that war, there might have been a settlement that was not tilted hard toward one set of powers and against another set of powers. And as we saw, and you talk about in the book, the peace that was agreed to after World War I, plus American withdrawal from the world, helped create the circumstances for the rise of Bolshevism, but in particular, and particularly alarmingly for the immediate term, the rise of fascism and Nazism. When you go back and look at World War I, what do you make of that, and then talk a bit about how American withdrawal from the world to you represents something like what may be happening now.

KAGAN: You know it's a fascinating topic, and I have to say I've spent the last eight years writing and researching about this topic. I've got my next book that comes out is all about this period in American foreign policy from 1900 to 1941, and looks a lot at the question of American involvement in World War I, and you know, was that the right decision, and if so, why?

And I think one of the problems that we have in looking back on that period, and this was a result of a lot of what was then known as revisionist history in the 1920s and 30s, is we've forgotten what kind of government Germany was in those days. We now look back

on that war as everybody stumbled into it, and it was all a bunch of accidents, and nobody really wanted it. People talk about sleepwalking into the conflict, but that's really not what happened, and it really was understood not just in Britain and the United States and France, but also in Germany, as an ideological struggle, that Germany was fighting obviously for its own territorial aggrandizement, but it also felt that it was fighting for a better way, what they called *kultur*, the German *kultur*, which was fundamentally anti-liberal. They didn't believe the government existed to serve and protect the rights of individuals, they believed very strongly that the individual existed to serve the state and the collective. And there was really a conflict there.

So if you ask the question, what would have happened if the United States had stayed out of the war? What would have happened was that a very dominant Germany would have controlled all of Europe. Now, would it have controlled it forever? I don't know. But this idea that it would have been a benevolent German hegemony in Europe is belied by German behavior before and during the war, as well as German objectives, which were much greater I think than a lot of people understood. So that would have been German Imperial domination of Europe with all kinds of ramifications for the United States.

DIONNE: Is it your view that Germany would have had that kind of dominant victory? Because I think the view that I'm defending is based on the idea that there would have been something closer to a stand-off than an overwhelming German victory.

KAGAN: It wasn't a standoff. I mean by the time the United States got into the war, Britain was effectively spent, and it was only American financing, and then American naval capacity that saved Britain. Britain was about at the end of its rope. France was effectively "bled white" as the way they put it. They were desperate for American help at that point, so the United States actually didn't win the war in a technical sense, it wasn't American troops. The infusion and the promise of American wealth, materiel, and bodies, because we were going to ultimately send three million over was what turned the tide in the war,

otherwise, it would have been a German victory on the continent. So we shouldn't spend too much time on this.

But if you look then at the aftermath of the war, and this is I think for me, this is the critical part, and the role of the United States after the war, whatever you may or may not think about getting into the war. After the war, the United States had a critical role to play, and we talk about the failure of the Versailles Treaty, and all the things you talk about, excessive harshness on Germany, etc. The treaty was never supposed to work without the United States. And what the United States was going to do was provide the essential balance on the continent of Europe, which would keep the French from trying to bleed the Germans white and having a draconian peace on the one hand, while also providing France and Britain the security that they had lacked, which had led to the war in the first place. If the United States had stayed in Europe, the part of the League of Nations is only the kind of window dressing of it, but in fact, if the United States done after World War I what America did do after World War II, there would not have been a World War II. And that's sort of the big point that I'm trying to make here.

A situation had been created in Europe that was inherently unstable. The rise of Germany, the unification of Germany, after 1871 created a situation in Europe where Germany was too big for Europe. It could not be contained or balanced effectively by all the European powers together. And so you saw three consecutive wars — 1870-71, 1914, 1941 — a continuous cycle based on this fundamental instability. It was only the introduction of the United States that put an end to that cycle. And that is what America did after World War II, and that in my view, more than anything else, provided the basis for what we call the liberal world order today. It was a critical sort of redirecting of history that the United States accomplished.

DIONNE: This actually allows me to bring us to jump way forward on this, because looking back, it does seem to me that when Americans were watching what was

happening in Versailles, the alienation that was taking place from American engagement wasn't purely abstract. After all we won the war, it wasn't like we had been defeated. There was a sense that we had involved ourselves in someone else's imperial project, and it wasn't really working out that well. And obviously Woodrow Wilson bungled the politics I think domestically, partly because he had broken his promise not to go to war, which is always a dangerous thing to do, really big promises, voters remember. And secondly, he had bungled relations with the Republicans in Congress at the time.

But that brings us to an area where we did disagree at the time, and may still disagree, which is about Iraq. I had occasion to debate Bill Kristol with whom you wrote often in favor of the war in Iraq. We were on a sort of program and I said "look, I think the difference between us Bill, is that you believe the war in Iraq is World War II. And I believe the war in Iraq is World War I." And what I argued to Bill is that my fear was that we would squander American power the way the West squandered its own power, the Western European nations squandered their power in World War I and at the end of all this, we will not achieve the objectives that you guys are selling, and we will find ourselves less influential in the world. And that the World War II view was "aha! The U.S. will democratize the Middle East."

You stress for example WMD in the book, which was obviously the upfront reason for the war because that's the one Americans could relate to. But there was, a central reason for the war was a grand view that we could use victory in Iraq to push democracy through the Middle East. And that always struck me as a lovely idea if it could happen, but I was very skeptical that that was going to be the outcome of the war.

So I'll just make the whole argument and you can reply. When we look at how Americans feel about foreign engagement right now, I think there is a huge hangover from the mistake in Iraq, and Donald Trump, who we agree is an opportunist, who we know has supported the war initially and then when he ran for president he turned on President

Bush, George W. Bush, and it spoke to that sense Americans had about, why in the world did we do this? So talk about that.

KAGAN: Well first of all that's extremely well laid out, that argument, I've never heard it better laid out. It's something that I think we're going to continue to grapple with for some time. Just as by the way as our earlier part of this conversation, we're still grappling with what World War I was about. I mean it's sort of wonderful and unnerving at the same time that these issues of history are never finally settled. It's amazing that we could still have an argument about what World War I was really all about.

My view of this is, first of all, I never thought of the war, and I don't think it's fair actually to characterize the war as a war to make the world safe for democracy. I personally believe that the democratic justification was ex post facto and more designed —

DIONNE: — that's small d, democratic —

KAGAN: — right, that it was designed to deal with the fact that we hadn't discovered weapons of mass destruction. But I'm quite confident that the initial impulse to go to war in Iraq was entirely about weapons of mass destruction. Now, was Saddam Hussein a brutal dictator? Did that make us—and I don't mean us, I'm talking about the American people, because let's not forget an overwhelming percentage of Americans supported the war. Let me just say the Senate voted in favor of the war overwhelmingly so, and there were reasons for that. But if you want to jump in...

DIONNE: And I just want to ask you, just on American support for the war. I spent some time in that period looking a lot at polls and actually, in the initial stages when the administration began talking about war in the summer of '02 and the early fall, the polls were very ambivalent. And really you only had in the country, you know, and I could go back and cite the data, but if you can take my word for it, you really only had at best 40 percent of Americans who were really sold on this thing and a whole lot of Americans who were, it was after all 9/11, President Bush was very popular, they were prepared to hear a

case, but they were not persuaded going into that war. And I happened to write a column in that period where I interviewed a lot of Republican Congressmen about what they were hearing back home, and it really struck me that these Republicans were saying you know, our people aren't really sold on this war yet. And I always thought that yes, by the time we went in, because Americans rally around their troops and the flag, the support went up. But there were always great doubts about this which is why when support for the war eroded and then collapsed, it struck me that we were simply going back to where we were when the whole thing started in that pre-war period.

KAGAN: Well look, I mean if you look at every war the United States has ever fought, with the possible exception of the Spanish-American War, which was unbelievably popular, what you just described about Iraq is the way Americans approached every war we ever went into. I mean you brought up World War I. There was tremendous opposition to entering the European War, up until two or three months before we finally did. And then there was a tremendous swing in favor of doing it, and not just because of rallying around the flag, it was a response to particular events that had happened. World War II, needless to say, Americans were tremendously opposed to getting involved in the European war right up until the time that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

DIONNE: Although we were very divided, I mean in other words, there was a strong, I agree, there was a lot of opposition engagement in World War II, there's no question about it. I think that that was a sort of narrower spread between people who really thought we needed to get in and not, which is partly why FDR won in 1940, although he did promise not to get in.

KAGAN: I was about to bring up the fact that in terms of presidents promising not to get into war, Roosevelt's right up there, but thank you for raising it. Anyway. Now I don't remember where we even began this discussion, but what I wanted to say is...

DIONNE: I guess what I want to focus on is, I think that the disengagement from the

world...

KAGAN: You're totally right that Americans' reaction to Iraq has contributed to where we are today in terms of public opinion. I don't think there's any question about that. But what I would suggest, and what I try to talk about in the book, is it's interesting to compare that reaction to Iraq to the American reaction to Vietnam. In terms of the overall cost to the United States, in terms of lives, Vietnam was 10-15 times greater than Iraq. The national trauma of Vietnam was infinitely greater even than the arguments that we've been having over Iraq since then, it really tore the nation apart. And yet, what was interesting is that within a few years after an outright American defeat in Vietnam, the country is electing Ronald Reagan on a "we've got to rebuild our defenses, we've got to get back out there" mode. Whereas now, after Iraq, which is you know for all of its terrible consequences, is still a fraction of Vietnam in that regard.

We are still in this sort of, traumatized by this event, and that's to me is what is worth exploring, why is that. It can't be just Iraq by itself. There's got to be more going on than that, and that's what I'm trying to address in part of this book right here, because I think that Americans after Vietnam were still fundamentally anticommunist. You know they may have exaggerated even the threat of communism, but it meant something to them. They were still in favor of the general strategy of containment, even though that strategy had led Americans into Vietnam, and Korea for that matter.

I think what has been true since the end of the Cold War is that there is no sort of idea about what America's purpose in the world that would lead Americans to say what we could say, which is Iraq was a terrible mistake, we need to work hard not to make that kind of mistake again. But it doesn't mean that we should pull back from the world in general, and it's that response that I think you know is in a way, the one that requires more explanation and is more significant. Iraq didn't have to lead America to want to pull back to the degree that they have wanted to.

DIONNE: I think to the extent that we have disagreements, they may each be rooted in different readings of history. I would look at the Reagan era somewhat differently. That Reagan, yes, did promise to push back against the Soviet Union, yes he did increase defense spending. What struck me is that Reagan did not commit American troops to any major engagement while he was in power. He sent those troops into Beirut, where I happened to cover as a journalist, which was a terrible mistake because they were serving absolutely no purpose in Beirut. He pulled them out after the horrible bombing that killed 241 Marines, went into Grenada, which is hardly a major intervention, some believe partly to distract from Lebanon.

And it wasn't until the first war with Iraq, it wasn't until Kuwait that I think the Vietnam hangover, if you want to call it that, was lifted, and that was because George H.W. Bush had very clear, narrow objectives, put a lot of power in, achieved a victory, and did not try to push beyond what he felt the mandate for that war was, which was to throw Saddam out of Kuwait.

KAGAN: Even though that war had far less popular support than the next Iraq war and far less support in the Senate than the next Iraq war. I mean that's interesting, you know there were whole Democratic careers lost because they opposed George Bush's war.

You're right about Reagan. Though I have to say there's been this sort of revisionist history of Reagan which I find very amusing, which is that Reagan was just keeping it cool, man. You know everything was just peaceful, etc. Do we not remember that people thought Ronald Reagan—forget about whether he was intervening somewhere—they thought he was going to get us all blown up in a nuclear holocaust. I mean, the Democratic response to Ronald Reagan, at least throughout the first five years of his presidency was, he is going to get us into a nuclear war. And you know, it felt like Reagan was being a very aggressive president, especially in those early years before the talks with Gorbachev

began to turn things around. So the truth is that the 1984 election was a case where you had a president who seemed very hawkish, he was being painted by the Democrats as a dangerous man, and he won that election overwhelmingly.

DIONNE: Over, by the way, a Democrat who broadly had spent his whole life supporting America's engagement in the world.

KAGAN: Which is even more ironic. The only point I want to make is, the American people were ready for that kind of approach in the early 80s, partly because of the Iran hostage crisis, partly because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. They responded to those two events by saying we need to get back out there and be strong. And that's not where we are today. Even though the threats are arguably greater today than they were then, the threats in the world.

DIONNE: The reason I emphasize Reagan's actions in terms of intervening with American troops, over the arguments over the proper way to confront the Soviet Union, is to sort of question the larger thesis of your book, about whether Americans have pulled back from these commitments in the world in as fundamental a way as you suggest. Because it's clear that Reagan was, among other things, a shrewd politician, and he clearly assessed that there was a very limited appetite on the part of the American people, even though they elected him, partly because of a messy economy in 1980. Even though they elected him, he understood the limits of public opinion. And I think that we are similarly facing limits of public opinion.

It's not clear to me that the American people confronted with new threats would simply say no, we've washed our hands of this permanently. And an example, and this allows us to pivot to now, and I mean really right now. It's striking to me that in the reaction to Russian intervention in our election, there are an awful lot of liberals who for example, disagreed with you on Iraq like me, who nonetheless believe that Vladimir Putin poses a genuine threat to the democratic order, and one of the things I liked in your book was the

way in which you talked about how Putin, the way I look at it is, Putin is building a new international, but it's mostly on the right, that it's a right wing international. Putin's an opportunist so he supports the left wing parties where it's convenient, but it is largely a nationalist, traditionalist set of arguments that he's making, and he has supported all of these right wing nationalist parties in Europe.

KAGAN: As does Donald Trump.

DIONNE: As does Donald Trump. Exactly. And it strikes me that the antibodies of small d democratic America are kicking in right now, and that there is a lot of opposition including from liberals, you know who were very skeptical of Iraq, are skeptical of certain interventions, who were torn about Syria. You write about Obama in Syria, which we can also talk about. But nonetheless, when faced with a threat to the democratic order in the world, or we'll put it another way, to those forces in the world supporting democracy, are responding. Are you too pessimistic about the nature of American opinion right now?

KAGAN: I may be too pessimistic, and believe me, I don't want to be pessimistic. I want to think that you know just as we rebounded after Korea, we rebounded after Vietnam, that we will rebound again, you know in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan and all the disappointments and costs of those conflicts. And I would agree with you that people want to separate, well we don't want to go to war and we don't have another Iraq but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be good allies. And I agree that there are people who feel that way.

But I think E.J., you'd have to agree that even the Democratic Party today is not Walter Mondale's Democratic Party. And I've talked to many who I'm sure you know and I won't name them, but, people who would have been considered sort of defense Democrats, even in the 1990s. I would say Clinton Democrats, and let's not forget that Clinton also intervened in conflicts overseas when he was in office. And Hillary Clinton, before we started today, you described I think correctly, has what you might call a hawkish

Democrat. I know the people who are in that wing of the party are feeling very beleaguered as we've seen the rise in the party of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who I think represent a different strain of Democratic foreign policy. Surely one of the major elements of Trump's sort of overall approach, which is the hostility to free trade, really has traditionally gotten more support in the Democratic Party, is certainly supported by what people call the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. And when it comes to Trump's argument that why should we be having all these troops overseas defending other countries who ought to be rich enough to take care of themselves, I think you'd agree that there's a majority of Democrats who would agree with that. They want to cut defense spending, they want to pull American forces considerably back from where they are today.

I think that is the consensus, and now it's the consensus in both parties. It used to be the Democrats are sort of more on the dovish side, Republicans were more on the hawkish side. Today, Republicans are more on a kind of 1920s Republican—I won't call it isolationism, but definitely in favor of retrenchment. That is the mood I see in the country today. It doesn't mean things can't change, a leader can't change things, but you tell me. Could Hillary Clinton transform the Democratic Party back to what it was in the 1990s, or would she have to make concessions to it? She did make a concession to it on the Trans-Pacific Partnership deal which she negotiated and then had to disavow in the election.

DIONNE: Right. I have a whole bunch of reactions to that...

KAGAN: And I had to go for a long time so I don't get all of your reactions in the middle of...

DIONNE: Let me react and then push again because we're here to discuss your book. You gave me an opportunity to open up another side of the argument. But I think the views in the Democratic Party are much more complicated than you describe. There are a lot of establishment Democratic foreign policy people who were burned by their support of the Iraq war. And they should feel burned. And I think again, my view was, it was a well-

intended, perhaps, but mistaken view.

I think trade, which I want to get to, is a very complicated issue and if there is beyond sort of some specific disagreements, I think that the emphasis in your book on power kind of underplays the economic side of this reaction. And I also want to sort of tweak you a bit on the conservatives who say they want big defense spending and want to cut taxes at the same time.

But I think what you're seeing in the Democratic Party is yes, a definite reaction to Iraq and a real "won't be fooled again" reaction when you look at the way that war was sold. You know, "we don't want the mushroom cloud to be produced by Saddam", there was a lot of reaction against that that I think was entirely legitimate. The balance of power in the Democratic Party is much more complicated, and even someone like Elizabeth Warren has spoken of America's role in defending democracy in the world.

And I guess, let me just, before we jump to economics, let me sort of throw two obvious lines of attack or criticism that you might get, one from the right and one from the left. Parts of the left would say we're glad the U.S. intervened in World War II, a world dominated by Nazism is not a world that anybody wants to live in. But in glorifying America's role in the world, you are overlooking all of the places in which the United States actually intervened against democracy and you know the list, in Iran, in Guatemala, all through Central America, in Chile with Pinochet, there were many moments and in the Middle East...

KAGAN: In which we still support dictatorships.

DIONNE: Right. That is an awfully rosy view.

KAGAN: I don't think it is, let me just stop you. I reject the idea that I'm offering a rosy view. In fact, I would say for someone who's making a case for American leadership, no one has ever made a darker case for that leadership.

DIONNE: That looks like a great blurb.

KAGAN: I know that's going to help me sell a lot of books. But I mean I think that, you know, I am, more than anyone, I would say go through in some detail the mistakes the United States has made, the hypocrisy that the United States has shown. You know, the fact that it's very hard to separate what people would call imperial behavior from leadership, etc. In fact, my point is more like a point that I think Reinhold Niebuhr was trying to make in the middle of the century, in the middle of last century.

DIONNE: As you do, you kind of appeal to my deepest instincts when you quoted Reinhold Niebuhr.

KAGAN: But you know his point was not, if the starting point is to say correctly, that wielding power yields immoral consequences, not only mistakes but actual immoral consequences when you wield power. It's unavoidable. To which Niebuhr's answer, I believe, was, you always have to be conscious of that reality and not think that you're just doing good when you wield power, because you will also be doing bad. But the other part of his argument is that doesn't mean you shouldn't be wielding power to try to do good. You know, he talks about the innocence of irresponsibility, which is to say we may feel like we're a better nation if we don't get involved and commit these immoral deeds, but Niebuhr's point was that is what irresponsibility is all about, and we felt that the United States had this role to play.

And so what I'm suggesting is—I'm not telling anyone—when I read a lot of people's arguments about what our foreign policy should be, they never say it's going to lead to anything bad. It's going to avoid all the bad things that we've been doing, but they never say it's going to lead to bad things. I'm about as frank as one can be in saying there are going to be mistakes. It's a question of what kind of mistake, can we learn from our mistakes. But there was no conduct of foreign policy that doesn't lead to mistakes and even immorality.

DIONNE: Just briefly let's take Niebuhr because everybody quotes him for their

purposes.

KAGAN: Exactly. I'm the only one who is quoting him correctly.

DIONNE: I believe that of myself. I think that during Iraq, especially, it was fascinating to see how much Niebuhr was cited both by hawks by doves, and yes, Obama is a real student of Niebuhr. His spontaneous summaries of what Niebuhr said are actually quite brilliant. And our colleague Bill Galston, who's very middle of the road Democrat, who was opposed to the Iraq war earlier than most people, wrote some fascinating things about Niebuhr at the time, and it struck me that Niebuhr would have been—we can't know where Niebuhr would have stood on Iraq, although his opposition to the Vietnam War suggests he may well have been opposed to that war.

But what Niebuhr really would have opposed, and yes in the book it's true that you acknowledge the dark side of American power in the world, but when you were leading up to that war there was a rhetoric that was dominant that really refused to face what Niebuhr talked about: the moral ambiguities of the use of power. And Niebuhr was constantly critical of the idea that if we hold too high a view of the United States' role in the world, even though he wanted an American role in the world, we will be deceiving ourselves into both pragmatic errors but also moral errors.

KAGAN: No absolutely. And look, I can only think of one president who ever led the nation into war with a Niebuhrian humility and sense of the complexity of it, and that was Abraham Lincoln. Otherwise, I've never seen any president Democratic or Republican remind Americans of the moral ambiguity of what they're about to do. They should, but they don't, because they don't think that's going to sell. Once a president decides on a policy, he wants to get approval for his policy, and so we don't talk enough about it.

But I think we should, because I think that foreign policy is a tragic activity. It's tragic in the sense that I would say on both the left and the right, we want to paint black and white pictures. You know, we're fighting against evil and we're good, or we're evil, we're

just on the wrong side. When of course the reality is, it's so much more complex than that. I love this quote from one of the John le Carré novels that it's "half-angels fighting half-devils" because that is sort of the reality of human existence. There's a book coming out later by Hal Brands talking about, Americans don't have this tragic sense of what it means to live in this international system which, by the way, is an anarchy. There are no rules. There's no justice in the international system. It's like Lincoln saying, "Only God knows ultimately whether we are doing the right thing, but we have to act in the knowledge that we are trying to do the right thing."

DIONNE: I just want to use your linkage to Lincoln to shout out one person, who is Congressman David Price of North Carolina, who besides being a congressman has studied theology and has written brilliantly about the linkage between Niebuhr and Lincoln. And that is very good. And Lincoln did have that tragic sense of human endeavor. There are certain things I like students to read no matter what class it is, and one is Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and the other is Lincoln's second inaugural.

KAGAN: On those things we agree, E.J.

DEWS: Let's take a quick break here for Andre Perry's Metro Lens.

PERRY: Hi I'm Andre Perry, David M. Rubenstein fellow at the Metropolitan Policy Program here at Brookings. Growing up in black America in the 70s, the portraits of MLK, JFK, and Jesus hung on the walls of many black families. Today, the new trinity of Oprah, Beyoncé and Michelle could almost replace them. Black women are making strides in every aspect of society. Between 2009 and 2012, a higher proportion of black women enrolled in college than all other racial groups and genders. The economic successes of recent movies, "Girls Trip" and "Hidden Figures", as well as the Essence Music Festival showed their buying and creative powers. And the works of writer Toni Morrison, political scientist Melissa Harris Perry, And actor Issa Rae signify black women's abilities to change how we see the world.

However, when girls do get out of school and into the workforce, they have to work more than 66 years to earn what white men earn in 40, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. And while Alicia Garza, Patrice Klores, and Opal Tometi literally made Black Lives Matter in the form of a hashtag, U.S. women's mortality rates are the highest in the industrialized world largely because of violence inflicted upon black women. Increasing power and cultural influence of black women don't equal protection brought by policy. Women's vulnerability warns that they are making gains in spite of public policy. However, black women's recent gains in politics may change that. London Breed became the first black female mayor of San Francisco, when she was sworn into office in July 2018. Ayanna Pressley won the Democratic primary, and it is expected that she will become the first woman of color elected to Congress from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. From their overwhelming impact in the 2017 Alabama special election for the U.S. Senate seat, vacated by U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, to the increase of black women running and winning elections at the state and local levels, there is clearly a new wave of electoral momentum.

By analyzing the demographic variables associated with the elections of black women, we can examine circumstances potentially impacting electoral success. Those insights can be used to create a framework, a blueprint if you will that can help boost black women and their supporters to succeed in attaining more reflective representation in elected office, so they can gain the protection they deserve. That's exactly what we did in the report: analysis of black women's electoral strength in an era of fractured politics. The Brookings Institution and the Higher Heights Leadership Fund collaborated to create a database comprised of elected officials at the federal, state, and municipal levels, as well as aspirant candidates. Information regarding their districts was also collected and analyzed to pinpoint predictors of electoral success. Based on the preliminary analysis, three major findings emerge.

One. The concentration of black residents in a district is positively correlated with black women's electoral success. Roughly two thirds of black women have been elected in districts where the black share is greater than 50 percent.

Second. Recent mayoral victories among 100 of the most populated cities, an unsuspecting wins throughout primary races this cycle show black women are becoming more viable in districts in which blacks are not the majority. Although a third of all black congresswomen and female state legislatures were elected in minority black districts, recent and past successes suggest black women are creating more and different routes to elected office.

And third. States with the highest percentage of black residents offer viable opportunities for black women to be elected statewide, and in minority black districts as over 500 majority black constituencies picked a representative in 2016. Yet, only one third of those seats were contested by black women. Black women made up six point six percent of the country's population, and six point five percent of the voting age population in 2016, but accounted for three point one percent of federal and state elected officials. In addition, black women made up 2 percent of candidates for legislative and executive offices in the database. In contrast, black men made up 5 percent of candidates, white women 19 percent, and white men sixty five percent.

While the percentage of all women running for office is rising, they are still sorely underrepresented. Over 500 majority black constituencies picked a representative in 2016, yet only a third of those seats were contested by black women. The proverbial glass ceiling is at the point of entry. More black women running can break it. Running black women especially in minority white districts will more than likely change the composition of lawmakers in the United States. This will provide black women the protection they need. For my own daughter's growth I owe the zeitgeist of black women's achievement as much as anything I have done. She has so many role models that teach her how to navigate

sexism, but I would be lying if I said my stress levels weren't as high for my daughter as for my sons. The data show that she is constantly in danger. As a T-shirt once read, "Black girls are magic but they are also real". Our masculine policies are dangerous to women. I'm not surprised, but I am encouraged by black women's political gains.

DEWS: You can learn more about Andre Perry and his research on our website. Also, look for an event where he presented in September on black women's electoral strength in an era of fractured politics. And now, back to the interview.

DIONNE: Economics. I think you downplay the role of economics in the frustration that people have both on the left, and on the Trumpian right, and among ordinary Americans who are not particularly ideological. And I could cite sort of a whole lot of statistics, but just in summary, since at least either 1973 or 1980, whichever date you want to pick, the combination of technological change, and trade patterns, globalization, has really hammered the living standards of lots of Americans, even as overall wealth has grown, the number of gadgets we have, the capacity for people listen to this podcast, all kinds of cool things have happened. But there were a lot of Americans who have not gained out of that and they feel they were sold a bill of goods. And I think the reaction is fair when they were sold, "Yes, well, there will be some people who lose out from these trade agreements but we'll take care of that", and we never took care of that.

And Trump's vote is, I think we probably do agree from the book, more about race, culture, immigration, and tribalism than it is economics. And yet, it's very striking that when you look at all of the analyses of the Trump vote by geography, he won in places that are in relative decline to the rest of the country. A great Brookings study, Hillary Clinton won only about 450 counties, but they represented 64 percent of American GDP. Trump won twenty five, twenty six hundred counties, somewhere in that range, but they only represent 34 percent of GDP.

You don't say much about economics or the cost of this world order to a lot of

people. And also a pet peeve of mine, my conservative friends who always seem to want to spend more on the military and cut taxes on wealthy people, and it doesn't seem that you guys, I'm saying you guys...

KAGAN: Don't you "you guys" me!

DIONNE: You've already "you guys" me, so I'm going to stick with it. You guys never want to pay the price, so why don't you relate them.

KAGAN: Well let me get back to that, absolutely, because the second one is not a hard one for me because I don't understand how we could be cutting taxes at the same time that we need to spend more not only on defense, but on other things like infrastructure and what have you. The Republicans used to be the ones who claimed that they were concerned about the budget deficit, and now they're blowing a bigger hole in our budget than anybody has ever done. And I just think that's just a dysfunctional quality.

Now, there are larger issues here. That's not the only act of political weakness that is going on now, we're also unable to get hold of what I gather I'm not supposed to call entitlement spending. I forget what word I'm supposed to use. But we have programs that are increasingly unfunded that we refuse to get a hold of.

DIONNE: Or finance.

KAGAN: Or finance, either one. But I mean you mentioned Brookings studies, you know if you go back to the sort of budget documents that Alice Rivlin and others have put out, and Domenici's, you know remember all these different efforts to balance the budget. They all said this is not being driven by defense spending. I think it's very important to say that fiscal policies and other budget priorities are much more significant than the defense budget. Now, should we not be cutting taxes at this moment, I'm in agreement with you on that.

But let's set that aside and talk about your larger point. And I will plead guilty to not spending as much time on economic consequences, partly because I feel like what I am

talking about is what people talk about less; I am talking about politics, geopolitics, and power more than people generally. I'm compensating in a way for what I think is inadequate attention to that basic fact.

You are a much better expert on domestic politics in the United States than I am, but I am seeing all kinds of studies that suggest that while economic anxiety was certainly present in this last election, this election really turned as much as anything on the issues that you mentioned: tribalism, I think white fear, that they are being overtaken in society by other groups, etc. Did economic anxiety play a role in sort of goosing those apprehensions? It may well have, but I think we are dealing with, you know if this were an economic problem you could say "well let's deal with the economic problem."

I actually feel like we're dealing with a much more endemic problem that is in American society and has always been in American society. We've had huge economic dislocations in the past, as you know. To me, this election reminds me a lot of the 1920 election because you were dealing then with the economic dislocation of the farm life disappearing, people moving into the cities, but you were also dealing with increasing migration of African-Americans north and into cities...

DIONNE: Well that started later.

KAGAN: No, it started earlier.

DIONNE: I just want to say, by the way, that this comparison is probably unfair to Warren G. Harding...

KAGAN: Well no, I know, the difference is that we got Warren Harding who was just sort of boring and incompetent.

But in any case, and I don't disagree with you that economic anxiety is there, but I think we have to address this fundamental question of what is American nationalism. Because for me, it has implications for foreign policy, and to the degree that some people think about America as fundamentally a white country and that that is the kind of

nationalism we're talking about. And I'm not talking about just white supremacists, but even the late Sam Huntington talked about this in his last books. To the degree that we view America that way, and not as a nation founded on universal principles which have application to everybody around the world. That does have implications for foreign policy that I think we're seeing right now.

DIONNE: And with that, we could probably move toward a close, even though I would like to continue some of these arguments, at the next dinner, maybe the next podcast, or maybe we can have a dinner and a podcast at the same time.

Donald Trump, and the dangers of Trump and Trumpism, and this is where we have found unusual alliances in American politics at the moment. If I'm right, you supported Hillary Clinton for president in the last election. It's interesting in passing that you have an analysis of Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama. And you identify Hillary Clinton as in a sense, the most hawkish, or the most supportive of those four for the world order.

I think since the election of Trump, there are a lot of voices on both left of the center and right of the center and in the center who have said something you say in the book, "you don't realize a world order is gone until it's gone." I've been saying that the last two years have been brought to you by the folk singer Joni Mitchell, which is "you don't know what you got till it's gone."

And I think that with the troubles in Europe, the rise of authoritarian regimes or authoritarian-behaving regimes in Poland and Hungary, the decline of democracy in Turkey, the rise of the AfD in Germany, Le Pen's big vote, she was beaten, but she got a lot more votes than her dad did for the National Front...

KAGAN: They're already talking about how Macron is losing popular support.

DIONNE: He is down to 29 percent in one poll that I saw the other day. And then Brexit, which is a complicated phenomenon, but certainly some of the forces behind it

were, not all the forces behind it, but certainly a backlash against immigration was key to that. I think a lot of people on all sides of politics who care about democracy as a central goal, value, are taking another look at the world. Talk about Trump and how your book would play into that conversation that's going on, and who are you trying to persuade here.

KAGAN: I'm trying to persuade you, E.J. No I think you and I on most of these basic issues are pretty fundamentally in agreement. But, I guess what I would say is two things are true.

One is that the direction of the United States has been taking in its foreign policy is not all about Donald Trump. Most of the attitudes that he has played on successfully to get himself first the nomination and then the election, are attitudes that have existed in this country in some cases for a century or more, and in some cases certainly in recent decades, I would say at least since the end of the Cold War, and certainly in response to Iraq and Afghanistan as we've discussed. So this isn't just about Trump. Now, that has an implication which is it means that even if Trump is gone in 2020, after 2020, it doesn't mean American foreign policy is going to do a 180 and move back toward the kind of policies that we had for 75 years, or even a new version of those kinds of policies. I think that the United States is like a battleship, turned slowly and that what we saw under Trump, you could see elements of it during the Obama years, and you're going to continue to see it.

Now in addition to that, however, and getting to your point, Trump is special in one way, which is that I think because he was elected in a sense, running against not only an elite in America, but an international elite, the international, you know if you listen to Steve Bannon it's the international financial world, the international banking community, free trade, all those things that you talk about as harming certain segments of the American population. He is not only opposed to that liberal elite in the United States, but he's also opposed to what he perceives as the liberal elite internationally.

So you go through all those situations in Europe that you're talking about. This administration has reached out to Viktor Orbán, who's practically a pariah in Europe. This administration not only supports Brexit, but they don't even support Theresa May. Trump prefers Farage, who is a far right kook in British politics. In France, he clearly supports Le Pen. In Germany, he certainly hates Merkel and I don't think would mind if the right grew in influence in Germany. He supports the present Italian government which is the least sort of democratically inclined government we've seen in a long time. And so what we have now is a kind of reversal of the normal international alliances within countries that we've seen over many decades. It used to be that the United States president, whether it was Bill Clinton or Ronald Reagan or George Bush, supported some version of the center-right, center-left establishment.

DIONNE: Or Barack Obama.

KAGAN: Or Barack Obama, sure, supported some version of center-right, center-left establishment in Europe. This is the first time we've had an American president supporting right-wing forces, right-wing nationalist forces that would like to overthrow that establishment in Europe and that, I think has potentially really powerful implications.

DIONNE: And incidentally I had to throw in Obama there. I think that we could have a whole side conversation about whether Obama's policy undercut the global democratic order which you seemed to argue, or whether Obama was trying to make adjustments in American policy that might give that democratic order a longer life.

KAGAN: He was certainly trying to do the latter, I would agree with that. I don't know that he succeeded in doing the latter. But you're right that's another conversation.

DIONNE: You talk about this as a dark book, although a very readable dark book I have to say.

KAGAN: It ends on a hopeful note, I just want to be clear.

DIONNE: You know, I'm with *The Economist*. I actually think the small d democratic

idea itself has more power than we realize in the end. And obviously if there's no power at all behind that idea in the world then it will be in big trouble. And I think the arguments we will have going forward is what does that power look like? Where does it require us to intervene? Where should we stay out for moral, prudential, or often usually prudential reasons?

But there is a passage in your book where you actually argue that today's authoritarianism, and you have a lot say by the way about China that we haven't even discussed here, that authoritarianism may be more dangerous than communism was as an enemy. And I just want to read this passage and maybe we can close on a note of where we share, I think, many of the same concerns. You write,

“Authoritarians don't have the same vulnerability [as Communists did]. The case for authoritarianism during the Cold War was that it was traditional, organic, natural, yet perhaps the very naturalness of that authoritarianism makes it a bigger and more enduring threat. We have assumed that authoritarianism is a stage in the evolutionary process. But there may be no stages. Authoritarianism may be a stable condition of human existence, and more stable than liberalism and democracy. It appeals to core elements of human nature that liberalism does not always satisfy—the desire for order, for strong leadership, and perhaps above all, the yearning for the security of family, tribe, and nation. If the liberal world order stands for individual rights, freedom, universality, equality regardless of race or national origin, for cosmopolitanism and tolerance, the authoritarian regimes of today stand for the opposite, and in a very traditional, time honored way.”

So, will the Liberal Democrats win?

KAGAN: Well I think you know my answer is, liberal Democrats won't win unless they have sufficient power, and wisdom to use that power, to keep the garden from being overrun by the jungle. Again, I mentioned this before, but we just need to be careful about

thinking that, and I agree with you of course the democratic idea is powerful, and I think given sufficient support it will be the winner in most circumstances.

But we just have to remember that there is no simple teleological path that we're all on to democracy. And I go back to reminding people that in 1939, which is not the dark ages, it's not a million years ago, it's not that long ago, 1939. Those people in that world of 1939, we read about them in history books and we think there's some kind of alien creature—they're us. People haven't changed that much. In 1939, you had someone like Joe Kennedy in Britain telling Walter Lippmann, "Democracy is finished!" And there were many people around the world, we'd seen democracies folding up in Europe, not because of anything the United States or anybody else did. They just folded up. You know, fascism arose and became popular, democracy lost people's allegiance, even in the United States during the Depression people lost faith in democracy. We need to remember that that can happen also.

And that's why for me, it means we're in a continual struggle. And you're absolutely right how we struggle, where we struggle, how we deploy, the power that we have. These are critical questions we need to get them right. We will get them wrong but we need to do better than we've done in the past. But that there is a struggle. I think is something we need to recognize.

DIONNE: Because we both love Reinhold Niebuhr, and because I think we both think everybody should read Reinhold Niebuhr, I want to close our conversation with one of the great lines that Reinhold Niebuhr ever wrote. He said that "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, and man's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary." This was a lot of fun. Bob thanks for doing this.

KAGAN: I really enjoyed it. Thank you, E.J.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, including audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo with assistance from

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