

SEEKING THE EXTRAORDINARY

Ep 14 - Dennis Ross: A Global Phenomenon

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Michael Nathanson: Welcome fellow seekers of the extraordinary. Welcome to our shared quest, a quest, not for a thing, but for an idea, a quest, not for a place, but into deep inner unexplored regions of ourselves, a quest to understand how we can achieve our fullest potential by learning from others who have or are doing exactly that. May we always have the courage and wisdom to learn from those who have something to teach.

Join me now in Seeking the Extraordinary. I'm Michael Nathanson, your chief seeker of the extraordinary.

Listeners prepare yourselves for some serious learning today. Some serious perspective and wisdom. The kind that a person can derive only through years of broad experience and intensive study, put everything else aside and devote yourself for just a short time to one of the great, condensed learning opportunities of your lifetime.

The opportunity to meet the man that has been at the core of addressing some of the greatest geopolitical challenges of our time. Today's guests worked in key positions for presidents Reagan George H W Bush, Clinton and Obama, his bipartisan experiences dealing with the Middle East Russia, the Persian Gulf, South Asia, and other challenges are in a word vast. Want, a few examples?

Well, under President Bush, he was director of the State Departments, policy planning, staff, working on US policy regarding the former Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, arms control, and the 1991 Gulf War. He also worked with secretary of state James Baker on getting Israeli and Arab leaders to attend the Middle East peace conference in Madrid. He served as President Reagan's director of near east and south Asian affairs in the national security council. And President Clinton appointed him as Middle East envoy, enabling, him to broker various important agreements between the Israelis and Palestinians, including the 1995 interim agreement on the west bank and the Gaza strip also known as Oslo II. He was an important part of facilitating the Israeli Jordan peace treaty and attempting to bring Israel and Syria back to the negotiating table. He was special advisor for the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia for secretary of state Hillary Clinton and a special assistant to President Obama for the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and South Asia.

And by the way, if you haven't already assumed it, he's a PhD and has taught at several prestigious universities, including Brandeis, Georgetown, and Harvard. He has been published in pretty much all the major periodicals, has appeared extensively on TV and is also well-known for several influential books including the missing piece, the inside story of the fight for Middle East peace. He's a co-founder of the advocacy group United against nuclear Iran. And he even co-founded a synagogue I could go on, but it's time for us to get started. Please welcome the extraordinary Dennis Ross. Welcome Dennis.

Dennis Ross: Nice to be with you.

Michael Nathanson: My pleasure. Well, it's really great to have you, and I'm sure our listeners want me to dive right into your, your spectacular career, but this is a show about Seeking the Extraordinary and understanding what it is that makes people like you. So, as I would say extraordinary. So, what I didn't address in your bio were the more personal elements of your own life story.

And I thought it would be great if you could start by telling us a little bit more about Dennis Ross, the person, the part of you that we don't get to read about.

Dennis Ross: Well, first I aspire to be a professional basketball player, but obviously I didn't have the talent to do that. So I had to fall back on different kinds of pursuits.

I am still for those who know me well, I'm still a sports fanatic. And maybe, I don't know if that sets me apart, but it certainly gives me some perspective. You know, I, I think I was very much shaped by where I grew up. I grew up in the San Francisco area. I became politically involved at a time of both the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war.

And I think in a lot of ways that kind of created a, a kind of ethic of wanting to affect policy. I worked in the Bobby Kennedy. Political campaign and was actually at the ambassador hotel the night he was killed. Oh, wow. And, and that, I mean, if you look for the kind of things that shaped me, that's a kind of form of experience where someone you deeply believe in gets assassinated almost in front of your eyes.

And what he represented was something so profound in my mind that it was also a calling that. He, and his brother basically called on us to believe in public service to believe we could make a difference. And I think that had a lot to do with me, deciding that I would pursue an effort to try to affect policy.

And you know, I think that's probably not something that most people know about me, but that's really very much where I think a lot of my determination to try to influence what we would do. I think it really stemmed from.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. Wow. That's that's that's that's interesting story to hear that you had been there.

I mean, you, you must've had at some time thought many times probably thought about what the world would be like, had he not been assassinated?

Dennis Ross: I, you know, I have, I was at the time I was a sophomore in college and, and believed very much in what he represented. He was this kind of unique blend of idealism and practice.

Yeah. And that unique blend is what you need to get things done. You have to be motivated to change things because of your day idealism. You have to be practical enough to know that you can't simply impose on others. And so you have to figure out ways to engage in compromise and mutual adjustment. I think an answer to your question about what the world would be like.

We would have gotten out of Vietnam much sooner than we did. We would have addressed. I think issues like the Kerner commission report in 1967 basically said we were two different countries in terms of race. And this was, that issue was so important to him. You would have seen a very different kind of leadership on that than we were to see. So, I do think you know, the path that we weren't able to take because of the fascination is one that has left us poor as a country. And not nearly as, as I think, well positioned either domestically or internationally as we might've

Michael Nathanson: been. Sure. And it's, impossible to predict where all the ripples go as time moves on.

But but yeah, it's, it's difficult to, to, to think that the world wouldn't be dramatically different. Yeah. So before we're gonna start getting into some of the details about you, what I would describe as unparalleled career. I'd like to ask you, just say foundational question and, and that is, you know, I guess just given the story you just told me, did you ever imagine your career playing out the way it has played out?

Dennis Ross: It's a really interesting question because I ended up working for another political campaign actually for George McGovern for two years. And after that, I just. My string of, of losses with such a major is time to get out of, of political campaigning and more into really building an expertise. So early on, I would say when I went back to graduate school, my attitude was, I know what I want to work towards.

I want to aspire to have a position, the senior position on the national security, Kent national security council staff at the White House. So I did hope to be working on these kinds of issues. I will say. Getting there a lot sooner than I ever expected that I would.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. Your your resume really does go on forever.

I could have gotten into all of your books and some of the academic parts of what you've done. What's the most satisfying accomplishment of all that? Is it possible for you to identify a particular accomplishment and call it the most satisfying of your career?

Dennis Ross: You know, I would say there were probably two that stand out. One was, I did play a pretty significant role in the reunification of Germany and NATO. And I'm not focused on that accomplishment per se, but I was a checkpoint Charlie, for the end of checkpoint Charlie, and to actually see the reality of this take place. That was really a unique moment.

I felt it as a unique moment. The other one was I negotiated, the Hebron deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and it took two different 23-day shuttles, literally around the clock. So when I achieved that, you know, and it was, it was really just this extraordinarily intensive effort.

I think that was a unique moment for me personally, because that was something that I had to broker, you know, as in Germany, unification, NATO, I was a small part of the overall effort. I've played a role; I think in terms of helping to bring the Soviets along at that time with it. I was a small part of that effort, the brokering, something where I was the broker that, that gave me a real sense of accomplishment.

Michael Nathanson: So I didn't mention Hebron. I just referred generally to agreements between the Israelis and Palestinians. And I actually, referred instead to Oslo II where you very involved in that as well.

Dennis Ross: I was, the key to Oslo II, was that the parties ultimately did it themselves.

Although what I did at a unique moment, I would say I knew when to intervene. And I actually told Arafat that if we didn't reach an agreement, by the end of September, we were at the point where the PLO was not. We didn't revise the legislation that called the PLO a terrorist organization.

It wasn't because we didn't want to, but the Congress basically said, we're not going to change that legislation, but we'll give you a waiver. And it meant that every six months we had to report to Congress that the PLO was living up to its responsibilities.

And so I told Arafat that if we didn't reach an agreement by the end of September, that I doubt it very seriously that the Congress would, even if we asked for the waiver that the Congress would in fact, grant us that waiver and their whole approach to the negotiations changed after that.

And that I think that was kind of the turning point. So I was heavily involved in that, but still the essence of that negotiation was really a bilateral negotiation where I could pick and choose moments of intervening, but I wasn't the one brokering it.

Michael Nathanson: Well, you know as much as anyone about what is probably the longest currently ongoing conflict between two peoples.

And I recognize that calling it a conflict between two peoples oversimplifies the matter. And again, you'd know far better than I do. Because there are many peoples involved in the in the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. But my overall question for you, and this is a big, broad question, but I'd love to hear your answer. Do you think we'll see peace in our time in the Middle East?

Dennis Ross: A lot depends upon how you define our time. My mother lived to be 98, so, you know, maybe before, if, if I reach her stage. Maybe it's gonna be a long, hard slog still because we're, we're, in some ways we're in a worse position than we were when I was negotiating in the sense that there's complete disbelief between the two sides, which was not the case when I was our main envoy. By the way, the way you described it actually was not that far off from the essence of the conflict. This is basically two national movements competing for the same. That's the essence of it to national identities, to people's competing for the same space.

And the challenge is to figure out how you share that space, how you create two states for two peoples. When I hear some talk about one state, it's a reflection of what they really don't understand. One state guarantees and analyst's conflict. When you look at the Middle East, there isn't a state where there's more than one national identity, sectarian identity or tribal.

Again, where that state isn't at war with itself or in a state of complete paralysis. So if you wish that future for the Israelis and the Palestinians you'll call for one state so we have to get from where we are, where there's complete disbelief to the point where both sides can basically make the kind of adjustments that are going to be required.

And we're very far from that right now. Now that doesn't mean there aren't some new possibilities. There are because of the way the Sunni Arab states now look at it. They see Israel as a natural partner, they may be holding back somewhat because of the Palestinian issue, but not nearly as much as most people think they are increasingly fatigued with the Palestinians.

And they look at what Israel has to offer. And it's not just security. They hunger to create progress because they realize they really won't have a future instability without it. And they look at Israel as, you know, the start-up. With a completely digitalized economy and that's what they seek.

So it's not just the security dimension where they see Israel as a bulwark against the Iranians or Israel as a bulwark against the Muslim brotherhood. It's also this important economic dimension that is driving, I think a very different set of attitudes, which we can actually use to try to break the stalemate between Israelis and Palestine.

Michael Nathanson: Is there any progress being made right now? That is, what we see in the news. It doesn't look like it doesn't look like anyone's talking to anybody. Do you think that they are talking?

Dennis Ross: Between Israelis and Palestinians? There's very little direct progress. Now there is a new Israeli government. It is an unprecedented government in the sense that it has two far right-wing parties.

It has one right of center party. It has two Centrus parties. It has two left wing parties. And for the first time ever, it has an Arab party. They ideologically can't agree on what the outcome of Israeli Palestinian conflict could be. Meaning the right-wing parties don't believe in a two-state solution, although they don't really have an alternative for it either, but they believe in a new terminology called shrinking.

And that is focused very heavily on creating new realities on the ground to reduce tension points of friction, to improve the day-to-day realities for Palestinians. This actually creates some possibility from the ground up. You still need something from the top down. And that's where I look at Arab states that are talking to Israel, including those that don't have a relationship.

We can focus on how to get some of them, like for example, Saudi Arabia. And I just returned from one week in Saudi Arabia yesterday, I look at the Saudis as having an interest in developing the relationship with Israel and, but not being able to move in one big leap. So you can think about a kind of three-way process where the Saudis respond to what we might offer, which is a set of suggestions about steps they could take towards Israel, see what they would want the Israelis to do to respond to that for the Palestinians, talk to the Palestinians. Once you have something in your pocket and say, okay, you don't just get it to receive. And the Saudis themselves will also say, okay, what do we get from the United States?

We're doing this. And to give you to make it more concrete, let's say the Saudis would be open to establishing a commercial trade office in Tel Aviv, not full normalization, not a full peace treaty. But moving with that kind of a step, cause it also addresses interests and needs of theirs. They might ask from the Israelis: how about you stop building outside the security barrier. The Israelis created a security barrier on about 7 to 8% of the west bank, closest to the green line. Meaning the June 4 67 lines. That's really areas where the vast majority of Israeli civilians live. 85% of all the Israelis who lived beyond the green line live on about 7% of the west bank. Not a surprise because the fact is most went there, not for ideological reasons, but for economic quality of life reasons. So they live close to the major Israeli cities. Now, if you build within those block areas, that's consistent with a two-state outcome. If you stop building to the east security barrier, which would be where a Palestinian state would be, then you preserve the possibility.

So let's say the Saudis could be protected to establish that the commercial deployment, that commercial trade office in Tel Aviv and the Israel, and they would say, we'll, we're willing to do that provided you Israel stopped building to the security barrier because that in effect means no more creeping annexation and it preserves the option of two states.

It doesn't guarantee it, but it preserves the option of separation. So you can have two states. One of the problems is if Israel keeps building beyond the security barrier and they now have about 113,000 settlers, we'll live beyond it. You're going to hit a point, and nobody can say exactly when, when you can no longer separate.

If you lose the ability to separate Israelis and Palestinians, then you can't have two states, then you have one state. And as I described, the one state guarantees of perpetual conflict, ?

Michael Nathanson: So your experience tells us we need to have a two-state solution.

Dennis Ross: We need it because as I said, both peoples have a very strong national identity. Those who think the Palestinians will give up their national identity. Ignore realities.

They identify as a people. No one's going to persuade them that they're not. So you have to come up with an outcome that addresses that and you have to do it in a way that secures the state for them, but also does it in a way that doesn't undercut it, Israel security and you know, there are things that can be done to ensure that.

I will tell you, I have come to the conclusion that we will never get to an outcome if we don't build from the ground up so that you begin to create this stuff of peace, but we also have a top down approach and we need to involve Egypt and Jordan in it because in the end, the security arrangements will end up being anchored in the west bank with the Palestinians and Jordanians and in Gaza with what's going on in Gaza and the Egyptians.

So there are new ways to think about it. But, you know, we're very far from creating the psychological reality or atmosphere that would make each side more open to making the kind of moves I'm suggesting

Michael Nathanson: I read, I don't know if this is true, but I read that you've made statements both for and against the division of Jerusalem.

What's your, what's your thinking on the status of Jerusalem?

Dennis Ross: I've been pretty consistent on I don't know where I'm quoted where I'm saying one thing versus another, but I'll just, since I have an opportunity right now to put it on the record, we'd leave. Say it. But at the end of the day, there are 300,000 Palestinians who live in east Jerusalem.

If one is concerned about the demographic balance between Jews and Arabs in Israel, there's no way in the world you want to absorb 300,000 Palestinians into Israel. So I do believe. And by the way, if you go and you look at the area part of east Jerusalem, there are differences between the area part of east Jerusalem and the rest of the Jewish part of east Jerusalem.

And the rest of Jerusalem is profoundly different. And for those who say that Israel should be treated as one city, I mean, Jerusalem should be treated as one city. It's not treated as one city today. The investment in infrastructure is totally different. Number of hospitals, totally different schools and education space.

Totally different. So you can't pretend it's one city when it already isn't. So my position is end of the day, there should be a city that isn't divided, meaning I am in favor of no division of the city, but to capitals for two states and you can do it. You can have one city council, right? You can have two different mayors for the different parts of the city.

The city. If you think about it, it's, it's really three different cities. It's a religious city so you have to have a special approach to the religious sites. It's a day-to-day administrative city. So you have to create and approach for administration. To give you a sense of what that means in the old city of Jerusalem, which has about 38,000 people, the quarters you have the Jewish quarter, the Armenian quarter, the Christian quarter, and the Muslim quarter. These are so tightly tied together. If you spring a leak in one of the quarters, you have to turn off the water and one adjacent to it. So even if you're saying you're going to split it symbolically and politically, you have to have a special regime where it practically, so you can create a symbolism or sovereign do that is a way to address what again are these political needs, but you have to have a very practical [00:22:00] approach because real people live there and the practical approach has to deal with the realities of day-to-day life.

Michael Nathanson: You make it all sound simple as though it should just just happen. It's so it sounds logical when you speak about it, it's a, it's too bad that we're, we're not there. You've you've, you've taken some fire in the past. You've been accused by, by some people of being biased toward Israel. You don't sound it to me. Does that bother you when you, when you heard those accusations?

Dennis Ross: You know, the conflict is characterized by such passion on each side. That for those who see it one way, it's a zero sum.

It's either all their way or nothing. And so, you know, for a long time, I will say I was accused of that, but it was, it was for political reasons, meaning the Palestinians, they couldn't attack the President because then the President says we're gone. Good luck to you. It really couldn't have hacked secretary of state. Cause it's pretty much the same thing, but you, you know, the negotiator is completely fair game. And I once had one of the Palestinian negotiators say, say to me, literally, he said, one night, we're just the two of us. We talk.

And he goes, you know why we attack you? I said, of course I know why you're talking to me. He says, but I knew he wanted to tell me anyway. And he said, because we can attack you. And the fact that you're Jewish, you know, it gives us a handle. Yeah, but he also said, but of course we know the, when we have a problem, we don't go to the President. We don't go to the secretary. We go to you. We know you're the only one who can solve these things. You know, in fact, I'll tell you when the end of the Clinton administration, I had a conversation with five weeks to go in and I had a conversation with Arafat and I said, look, President Clinton was gone in five weeks and I'm gone in five weeks.

And he said, well, I know he's leaving, but you can't leave. And I said, No, I'm, I'm leaving, I'm leaving when he's going. And he said, no, you can't leave. And I said, we've got five weeks left and I'm gone in five weeks. You know, if we were going to try to solve something the time to do it is right now. So this is kind of the reality.

It was a reality of, of what the negotiations like, and then there was a public reality. And look it's, as I said, for those who want to believe something. Yeah. And who have a passion one way or the other, you know, being someone who's trying to solve a conflict, you start on the presence basically on the premise that the needs of both sides have to be addressed. You can't just address the needs of one side, or you have no agreement. If you're addressing the needs of only one side, you're counting on the other side to surrender. Well, that's not actually an agreement. And if it's based on surrender, it won't survive anyway.

Michael Nathanson: This is a lesson we learn over and over.

I don't know if you've read Roger Fisher's *Getting to Yes*, but that's exactly the concept. You identified yourself as being Jewish. And I think I read about you that you, you actually didn't begin to practice as a Jew until after the six day war. Is that true?

Dennis Ross: I would say that's even earlier than I began to practice it.

I think the I grew up in an areligious house. I had, you know, almost no real religious education and in the case, in my case, it's when I, after first I became, I began to identify more as, even in a religious sense, not just in a kind of social sense after I got married and then when we had kids, then it became more important to me to try to set an example. So we joined a synagogue and a shoul then and then that became more important. And then I have to say, you know, the interesting thing is when I was our negotiator, the Shabbat came to mean more to me. I would go to services every Saturday morning, conservative shoul. And the value of that was, and everybody knew it.

I mean, the President knew, you know, Saturday morning, you weren't going to reach me. I mean, if they had to, they knew how to, but they weren't going to reach me and it gave me a real perspective. I mean, the whole logic of Shabbat is you're supposed to separate that from the rest of the week. You're supposed to, it's supposed to give you perspective.

And, and for me it did it gave me a place where I could sit back. It gave me a place where the rabbi Shevar Torres constantly made me think about more fundamental questions.

And so it created a genuine space for me that I really need.

And so that, that also did a lot to add to my sense of not just Jewish identification, but Jewish values and, and understanding better the source of those values.

Michael Nathanson: Thank you for that. I, again, I read, but don't know this about, I read that you the identify as a Democrat is that true?.

Dennis Ross: That's true.

Michael Nathanson: Okay. Okay.

Dennis Ross: Many of the things you read actually turned to be, right?

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. Some of them do, but I want to be very careful about, about my sources.

Yeah. But, but you seem to be the rare person that's been able to completely transcend politics. And while you're dealing with you know, politics between, you know, different countries and you know, all the political challenges you've faced. You don't seem to be someone who has been bogged down in Democrat versus Republican.

Dennis Ross: Look, I think I was look, I was a political appointee for Ronald Reagan and for George H. W. Bush and for Bill Clinton and for Barack Obama. We had an ethos for a long time that politics stopped at the water's edge. And you know, when you go back to. Reagan, the Reagan people knew I was a Democrat and appointed me to the NSC anyway. You know, the truth is I was a Democrat who developed a close relationship with George W. Bush. And, and so I, you know, I, I ended up being in his campaign as the senior less three months as a senior foreign policy advisor to the campaign that was based on primarily on having developed a personal relationship with it and having and having come to have an extremely high regard for him.

Although I have to say that on domestic issues, I wasn't aware where he was but on foreign policy issues, I, I very much was Clinton asked me to stay and then to become the negotiator. And, and I developed a close relationship with him and President Obama asked me to come. As well, and in a sense, all of them, they all accepted this premise that we should have people who are, who are professional on these issues, not political on these issues, or at least your administration should have people in the upper reaches of it that have people who have experience and approach these issues from a professional standpoint, not through a political lens.

Michael Nathanson: So I, I once attended a conference and, and I got to see President Clinton and secretary of state Albright speak together. And and I loved one of the questions that someone asked Secretary Albright. They asked her, who is your favorite American leader ever? And she didn't miss a beat.

She said, Bill Clinton was right next to, I'd like to ask you that question and you don't have anyone next to you right now. So, my question is of all the American leaders you got to work with, and you worked with many, who was your favorite.

Dennis Ross: I have to divide it into, into two categories. My favorite to work with because he was such a people person was Clinton.

My favorite to work with, from a policy standpoint was Bush and the national security areas. You know, he was just he was very thoughtful. He was very practical.

And, you know, there, there just, and there was also a kind of, he had a real personal code that I really respected. I wanna I wanna tell you a story because it kind of says a lot. So, as I said, I was as the senior foreign policy advisor to the campaign, I gotten to know him because I was at the NSC, as I said, the Reagan administration brought me. I was a senior Middle East person there. I went with him on a trip to the Middle East and, and we developed a relationship because I suggested to him on the trip there, he could actually achieve something, meaning a common set of principles between Egypt, Jordan, and Israel, which had never been done before.

He said, go ahead. If you can broker it, we'll do it. And so, and I was able to, so that, that built kind of an interesting bond. And then I would brief him frequently and so forth. And then he asked me to, to leave the NSC in the summer of 88 and be the senior foreign policy advisor.

So, I tell you this story because when he won Jim Baker, who had been the, the, who run the campaign, wanted me to come with him to the State Department. And Brent Scowcroft offered me the deputy national security advisor job and, Bush called me up and he said, I want you to take the position that you want to take.

I don't want you to feel pressured either by, by Jim or by Brent, you take the position that you feel is best for you. Now think about it. For him to take the time to call me to say that. You know, I'm not sure anybody else I worked for would have done that. He had one other thing about him when he lost he sent me a note. And he said, I don't want you to leave. If, if the President elect asked you to stay, I don't want you to think that being by leaving, you're being loyal to me, you'll be loyal to me if you're asked to stay and you stay. These were really extraordinary positions to take. And, and so, and that, that kind of personal code, that really meant a lot.

So that's why I would say I pick him from it was kind of a broader policy standpoint. I pick Clinton because first of all, Clinton could learn anything. You know, I, he would typically say before a meeting, he turned to me and said, okay, what do you want me to do in this meeting? And I would outline at A B and C and I'm, I can be pretty persuasive.

And when I need to be emotional, it can be emotional. And almost every time he would do it better than I told him. Because he literally could do anything. I mean, I, since I'm on a roll, I'll tell one other story about him

Michael Nathanson: Please. The last one was great.

Dennis Ross: That is very revealing. I mean, in terms of just his sheer talent.

So after the after the assassination of Rabin we went to Israel and and he wanted to give a speech to Israeli young people. And so I really on the plane on the way over, in addition to briefing, we had we had the former president's former secretary of state Congressional leaders. So I had to brief them on the shock that that Israel had experienced and what it meant, how they were there to create a kind of collective hug because of the trauma that Israel was feeling.

And so the speech that Clinton was going to give, especially to Israeli young people had to be that equivalent of creating the sense of we're with you. You know, this is a trauma, we understand it, but it had to be emotional. It had to create an emotional connection. So the speech writers did the draft then gave it to me on the plane over, and I really worked it over, you know, I'm thinking to myself like, ah, I know what will strike a coordinator's room.

Cause I obviously have this connection. And I decided I also want to watch the speech from the state. So I'm in the, so I can look at it, the audience to see. So the speech is an unbelievable hit and everybody from the staff was coming up to me and thanking me. And I say, don't thank me. The 25% of the speech that was pedestrian.

And I wrote the 75% that he had lived was all him. He had lived 75% of the speech up there in a way that was simply. And you know, so far beyond anything that I had done. So, you know, he, he, he remains, but he was a unique talent.

Michael Nathanson: By the way, another great bipartisan answer right there. Well, let's maybe so so the the, the person who asked secretary Albright, that question then.

For her favorite international leader, I'd like to ask you the same question. Who's your favorite leader on the international side?

Dennis Ross: Well, there's it's actually no contest. You have Yitzhak Rabin.

Michael Nathanson: That was her answer too, by the way.

Dennis Ross: All right. Well, look, Rabin was the most, not just honest, the most intellectually honest leader I ever dealt with, he wasn't always easy to deal with.

If he had, he was the most analytical. You know, he would go ABCD and he would've, he, when he thought something through you couldn't move him. But you know, when he, if you had made an argument and reality proved you, right he's the only leader who would come up to me ever and say you were right. And I was wrong.

He couldn't tell a lie. He literally couldn't tell a lie. If he made a commitment to you. If his political fortunes could collapse, if he lived up to it, but he wouldn't anyway because that's who he was. And as I said, you know, he was, he was someone didn't lie to the Israeli public, and I never liked himself.

Michael Nathanson: I could, I could go on and just keep asking you these questions. I find them, I find your answers to be fascinating. And I know you have expertise that that covers a far broader area geographically than the Middle East. I'd like to ask you a general question. I read a book called *The Next 100 Years*. Did you read that book by any chance?

Dennis Ross: I haven't.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah, it was, it was, it was a, it was a really fun read by a futurist who wrote it in, around, around the 2000 period and tried to describe what the world would look like over the next hundred years.

Any, what would your guess be? What does the world look like in a hundred years?

Dennis Ross: You know, when you think about the pace of change right now, especially in the medical area, notwithstanding, COVID even, even looking at COVID that we could have developed a vaccine, you know, in less than 50 days is itself extraordinary.

We're going to go through a complete revolution in terms of biotech we're going to be able to deal with things we couldn't imagine before. How we deal by the way, with expanding, extending lifespans dramatically because the biotech will basically be able to keep cells younger.

So they don't age the same way. That's going to create enormous challenges that, you know, we've never really had to contend with the character of, of travel. Will be, will become quite different as well. I suspect we will be able to travel to other planets in that time. And you know, that may great all sorts of opportunities to change the climate.

As we know it, I mean, quite literally the climate, as we know it all these great things we can do, technologically, the question is can we end conflict? Which seems to be endemic to humanity. And we have, we, every, these developments frequently, they, they create all sorts of advanced in terms of science and medicine and being able to deal with what can be food or water security issues.

I have no doubt we'll solve those through technology and biotech, but I wonder about these conflicts that seem endemic. And will these advances, will they simply compound conflicts? I worry about that even though I see the potential for such profound changes in terms of the way we live, how we interact.

I'm very hopeful about a lot of things as I'm implying, but I'm uneasy about conflicts that seem to endure regardless of change.

Michael Nathanson: You you've probably been described by others as being prolific. You're a prolific writer and speaker and thinker. Do you, do you have balance in your life? Do you you, you mentioned you're a big sports fanatic.

Dennis Ross: Yeah. I would say I have balance as far as sports. Would I say that I'm as interesting a person as I should be? No, you know, I should be much more interested in the arts. I should be much more interested. Yeah. In culture. I should, I should read many more novels, meaning I read almost exclusively non-fiction yeah, but I don't read fiction.

I mean, I think I would be a more balanced person if I, you know, if I had that kind of interests, which I, I should have, but don't, but I do think sports gives me a balance. I otherwise wouldn't have. And maybe that's part of the reason that I'm such a fanatical though. I have to say from the time I was a little kid, I was, I became a huge sports nut.

I mean, I'm from San Francisco. So I became, I, I went to every 49er home game from the time I was four years old until I went away to college. I used to go to candlestick in San Francisco. And you know, where you, you basically have to dress like it's winter game during the summer. So, yeah, I'm still I'm, and I went, I went to warrior games when I was a kid. And so I'm a huge fan of all of them. Still, those first kinds of identifications in sports, you know, they, you never give them up, even though I have to say, I have become, you can't live in Washington, not become a supporter of the Washington teams, but when push comes to shove, if they're playing one of the San Francisco teams, those original allegiance has come out.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. I completely understand. Yeah. The Nationals seem to have punted this year. They seem to have unloaded all the great players.

Dennis Ross: Well, they just dismantled the team. So there, they basically are betting on the future. Now we'll see how the bet goes.

Michael Nathanson: Do you have awareness around how much you've probably [00:40:00] changed the world, your actions?

Do you think about that?

Dennis Ross: Not really. I mean I aim is to try to change things. But I think, you know, the one thing know you have to retain when you do the kinds of things I've done is you better retain a very large measure of humility because if you don't, you lose all perspective. And you know, there are so many unknowns. You said before I can lay out things that are very logical about what can be done, but you know, the, the world has a way of imposing behaviors that you don't predict.

And so I tell my students don't fall in love with your own assumptions because, you know, you should constantly be checking them. And that's part of, I think, trying to retain humility when it comes to the Middle East, I may lay out here's what, how some things can be done and I, and I can make the case, but I also realize that you have to be pretty humble.

Michael Nathanson: I can't imagine the answer to this question is going to be yes. But do you have any regrets about your career?

Dennis Ross: No, I don't. I really don't have regrets about my career. I don't have, you know, I mean, I will tell you, I have one regret about at the beginning of the Obama administration, I made a mistake. I was asked to come to the White House to, for a new position that they would create that would be responsible for the area from Morocco to to all, to all of South Asia. And I chose instead to go with, with Hillary. And the reason I did was I knew her from the time of when I was, I was President Clinton's negotiator. I knew her well, and I really liked her and I knew she was very smart and very thoughtful, and I, I felt she would be successful, but I also, the mistake was that I thought she would be in a position much like Jim Baker, when I went, I made the choice to go with Baker and that was Scowcroft because I really had the sense that Baker was going to be where you could conceptualize the policy and then implement it.

The action would be at the State Department. And that proved to be exactly right in the Bush administration. I thought it would be same in the Obama administration because I knew Hillary had the talent. And I thought President Obama was going to be consumed by the economic meltdown. But the decision I made was wrong because basically every decision had to be made in the White House.

And had I gone at the beginning of the administration there instead of to the State Department I would have had a chance to prevent us from making what was a really serious mistake, insisting on a complete settlement freeze which was a fundamental mistake. And I, I made it clear to the President when I was asked one time.

Cause I was, my focus in the first six months was exclusively on Iran and not on the Israeli Palestine issue, but he would ask when I would be over there to talk about Iran, he would ask me questions. And I, and it was clear, nobody made the case at the beginning of the administration, not to go ahead and and proceed with a, with a settlement freeze.

And the reason it was wrong-headed was twofold. First, no Israeli prime minister had ever done a complete settlement, please. So you're asking someone like Bibi Netanyahu, who is a right wing. We couldn't. To do what they will. Prime ministers to his left did not do so you had to create great drama, but it was also a big, a big mistake because when you insisted on a complete settlement for you, you gave the Arabs and the Palestinians as an excuse to do nothing until you deliver it. We were put in a position; we were trapped by our own position and the objective we laid out. Our fundamental mistake of statecraft. If we had said we're going to limit settlement activity, then we could define what was success. And we didn't do that. And had I been there, I can't guarantee the President Obama would have agreed with me, but I can guarantee that he would have heard it at a time when the policy was still being formed.

Michael Nathanson: Was secretary Clinton sympathetic to your position?

Dennis Ross: She was, but she also felt that this is what the President wanted. And the first year she was kind of picking and choosing her battles and she was in a position where she had to decide what's the most important thing in terms of her priorities. And this was important, but it wasn't, it didn't rank up nearly as high as some of the other issues she was focused on.

And she also read him as being determined to do this, but nobody really made the case against it. And the result was, you know, I can't guarantee, as I said, things would've been different, but I regret that I didn't go to the White House.

When I was asked, look, I can tell you, I think some of the people at the White House viewed me through a suspicious lens because why would I go with Hillary rather than the President?

When I was asked to go with the President, you know, Hillary for her own part in the first year, she understood that some of the White House staff looked at her through the same kind of prism and at that's again, why I think she, she kind of had to pick and choose her [00:45:00] spots, you know, after the first year she had really created a relationship with President Obama that was different. So she could, she could be much more competent example being she pushed, but didn't succeed. She wanted us in Syria arm, at least the secular opposition. And she made the case, even though she knew that the President was against it.

Now, that was the kind of thing. It hadn't been the first year of the administration. Again, she would have to decide, was that important enough for her to try it?

Michael Nathanson: Who are your key role models or mentors over the years?

Dennis Ross: Well, I'll tell you probably the person I learned the most from was Jim Baker.

He was, and what's interesting. Baker is not someone who is a great theoretician and you know, and I'm, you know, I was trained, I was trained as an academic. And that's, you know, he was a lawyer and he was very, he was focused on how you get things done, but I watched him negotiate and he was a, he was constantly thinking three, four moves ahead.

And I've rarely seen, I've rarely been around anybody who had both the understanding that's what you had to do, but also the capacity to do it. And I learned, you know, I learned a number of lessons from him. In addition to what I just described. One of the lessons I learned is never for the sake of having a good meeting, leave any potential for misunderstanding.

I always say, you know, one lesson I learned was when you're in a negotiation at the end of the meeting, summarize very clearly. Exactly what's been done. Even if it means you add to a sense of, of difference. Many people want to have good feelings at the end of it. And if the good feelings disguise a problem that problem will be made much worse because one of the things I learned over time is no one ever thinks that it was a misunderstanding by, you know, by just that it just stands on its own that no one intended anything, they see it as a betrayal.

So you really have to be sure that everybody understands things the same way, even if it means that you're going to emphasize different. And it goes against the normal human instinct, but Baker is the one who really taught me that. So I think I probably learned more from him than anybody else that, that I was around.

Michael Nathanson: That's a great lesson too. Dennis, what do you think your legacy will be?

Dennis Ross: Well, I hope my legacy will be that I was someone who believed passionately and in conflict resolution, especially in the Middle East. And that I worked for that. And it, you know, I contributed in some way to trying to move things in a better direction.

Michael Nathanson: I've got three more, really quick questions for you. Can you offer any habits or techniques or tips that that have helped you be your most extraordinary self?

Dennis Ross: Well, I think being an active listener, what I mean by that is you always learn more when you're listening, then when you're. But also if you want to draw somebody out, you have to show genuine curiosity.

You really, you know, try to make it very clear. You really do want to understand where whoever you're dealing with, where they're coming from, why do they have the views they have, what created them in drawing people out and showing that you're interested in and you're trying to understand them better.

I think it's probably one of the most important attributes in any endeavor, but certainly in any negotiation, being an active listener is probably the most important attribute.

Michael Nathanson: Thank you. And what's the best advice you've ever received from someone or given to someone?

Dennis Ross: Probably the best advice was don't take yourself too seriously.

Michael Nathanson: That's definitely good advice.

Dennis Ross: And if you can't take a joke, don't show up.

Michael Nathanson: I like that too. I'd like to end with a, with a, a question that may relate to your answer about legacy. It may not. Do you have a personal mission?

Dennis Ross: Well, you know, look, this, I tell the story. I started actually off as an arms control negotiator and you know, that was all abstractions, very important, arms controlled as an end conflicts, but it tries to regulate them and manage them.

But it was all abstractions. I mean, are you at the time when I was doing it with the Soviet and then the Russians, it was, you know, the size of missiles they're throwaway, the, the payload, the bombs that could carry based on a theory of what makes things more stable versus less stable. When I began to work on the Arab Israeli issue and I would, and I sat with different negotiators on each side, every single one of them had lost somebody from their family.

And this is a conflict with a human face. So the personal admission is I will never give up on trying to lessen that conflict. Even if it can't be solved right now, I will continue to try to do whatever I can to lessen it and try to create the conditions for eventually settling it.

Michael Nathanson: Well, I want to thank you, Dennis.

That was a very very interesting interview. As I said, I could go on forever. But I want to be respectful of your time. Any parting words to leave for our listeners?

Dennis Ross: I just look, I enjoyed doing it very much and I, I do have, yeah, I have what I call an empathy rule in negotiations. Empathy is not self-sacrifice.

It's basically enlightened self-interest. If you want to move somebody, then you have to show you understand their needs. And if you want them to meet your needs, or if you're mediating, you want them to meet the other side's needs you have to prove in the first instance that you genuinely understand their needs.

I used to say, I could make the arguments of each side better than they could. Not because I was so smart, but because I'd heard them so often.

Michael Nathanson: My sense is if we all could, could get our hands around that insight, we would have a world of much less conflict.

And with that. I want to thank you, ladies and gentlemen, that is the extraordinary Dennis Ross.

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