Covering the World

INTERVIEW WITH

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■ How has your experience as a reporter affected your worldview?

Working as a foreign correspondent made me realize that you need to have a different style of reporting when you are abroad. For example, if you’re in Ukraine, you can’t just report about what the finance minister said to the foreign minister, because nobody in the United States cares. Instead, you need to describe what it feels like to live in Ukraine at a moment when people are thinking about independence from the Soviet Union.

In Europe, I developed a mode of reporting that was much more sociological and much less “who’s holding a press conference?” That helped me very much when I came home because I transferred that kind of reporting to answer questions like, “What does it feel like to be in Silicon Valley?” or “What’s it like at Yale or at Princeton?” It is important to describe the atmospherics of the place and capture what it feels like to be in a given place.

Being abroad also made me more aware of American exceptionalism. I went to Europe thinking Western Europeans and Americans were
very similar, and I came away realizing how profound the differences are—deep differences beneath the surface having to do with work ethic and worldview. Every time I go back, I’m reminded of the fundamental differences in values. I was just in Munich talking about terrorism at a defense ministers’ conference, and every American—Republican or Democrat—talked about how freedom is the one thing that will cure the pathologies that lead to terrorism. And every single European talked about poverty. It was just a whole different way of seeing the world. I came to the conclusion that while we have common projects we can work on, we have different values. I saw the Atlantic as a much wider ocean than I did before I went there.

■ How is covering the Bush presidency different from your experience covering previous administrations?

I get very good access to this White House. I met George W. Bush when he was campaigning, but I haven’t met him since he became president. It seems like the people he meets with are very few and very safe. I’ve met Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell a few times, and what surprises me most is that I rarely—if ever—get scoops from this administration. Even at dinner parties, members of this administration are very disciplined. Unlike the Clinton White House, I think the culture of this White House is, “We don’t gossip about each other. We don’t stab each other in the back. We’re supportive of each other. We love the president.”

And they really do love Bush. I have friends who, before they worked in the administration, were as cynical as the next person. I asked one friend who works at the White House, “Who’s the most impressive person you’ve met?” And he said, “Would it be too much of a suck-up to say President Bush?” This is a guy who did not particularly support the president before he went to work there because he thought he was an idiot. All White Houses worship the president, but this one in particular is a very corporate, loyal White House.

■ Do you think the White House has changed its foreign policy posture in President Bush’s second term?

Yes, there has been a huge, huge turn. The White House has a whole different frame of reference in the second term. Secretary of State Rice told me in an interview that the first term was a war term. There was a constant sense among officials in the administration that they
might be killed any day by a terrorist attack, and they felt they had to break things apart because the world could not continue to go the way it was going.

The second term is a peace term, and it is time to build alliances. The administration’s attitude is now much more relaxed, its body language is very different, and it has a much broader relationship with the world. The White House is less focused on the Middle East than it used to be and more globally focused. They are much happier to work with Europeans to try to rebuild relationships. A guy at the National Security Council called me to say how wonderful the French were in working on Lebanon, what effective diplomats they were, and so on. The second term is much less about breaking and defeating bad guys and much more about managing relationships. It’s funny because there has been all this talk about neocons and realists, yet these are the same people just acting differently when the situation changes.

I have some problems with President Bush, and there are some issues his mental skills are not great at grappling with, but I think he really does have an ability to see things dynamically over time and understand how strategies have to adapt to different situations. I think flexibility is something that not enough people in Washington appreciate. We tend to think that if somebody says something in January, they have to stick to principle and say the same thing in October. But the fact is practicing politicians see things dynamically.

Do you think U.S. policy is responsible for the changes we are seeing in the Middle East?

I think that if Bush had not made all his speeches about democracy and had not invaded Iraq, this wouldn’t be happening. But does that mean it is a direct relationship? No. I think the relationship is tricky, and I think there are two elements in how American pressure has helped to spark some of the changes in the Middle East.

First, I think what the American president says matters. Somehow, President Bush’s rhetoric has created a sort of peer pressure that has put freedom and democracy on people’s agendas around the world. One point that struck me about the pro-democracy rallies in Lebanon was the prominent role that the Lebanese flag played in the demonstrations and how many of the women had the flag painted on their cheeks. I saw the same thing in Central Europe during the demo-
ocratic transitions there. A certain set of democratic standards has been promulgated around the world, and I think people feel embarrassed when their country is not democratic. In Poland, Ukraine, and Russia I saw people who are very proud of their countries for taking the first step toward democracy, and Bush has helped put freedom on the top of people’s agendas.

The second element, as [former U.S. envoy to the Middle East] Dennis Ross described, is that the state of fear is being lifted from the Middle East. For decades there was a pervasive sense that “nothing ever changes here.” Now there’s a new sense that things can change. The deposition of Saddam Hussein contributed to that, and suddenly people have the sense that the American bully is on the side of freedom and change. Many of the people who don’t particularly like America have seized these democratic changes and are exploiting them to push for more freedom in their own countries, which is how it should be. The process of change in the Middle East is tricky. It’s a process of breaking the crockery and starting things over that encourage all of these different waves, which are still going to play out for good or ill.

How important is it for U.S. foreign policy to be consistent in its promotion of democracy?

I spoke to the people who wrote President Bush’s second inaugural address on the day of the speech, and one of the things they emphasized was that this was a speech for domestic consumption and for world consumption. The idea was that wherever the president goes for the next four years, people are going to throw that speech in his face. When he meets with the Chinese, or the Pakistanis, or the Egyptians, there is always going to be somebody saying, “What about that speech? You talked about freedom, and now you’re meeting with these tyrants.”

The administration wanted that. They wanted that standard to be set and thrown in their faces. They wanted it to be thrown in the face of anybody in the State Department who went around the world and was kissing up to dictators, and they thought it would be useful to lay down the standard so it could be thrown back in their faces for the next four years. These officials knew they weren’t going to be able to live up to it. In the real world you have to deal with [Pakistani President Pervez] Musharraf or whomever else.
But it’s still good to have a standard out there that is constantly being thrown in your face to make sure that your compromises do not become your goals. It is the State Department’s job to get along with whoever is in power. That’s fine. But it became the goal of the first [George H.W.] Bush administration to suck up to those in power, whether it was Gorbachev or anyone else. And that became self-destructive.

■ How does the U.S. domestic political system constrict American foreign policy?

The polarization of the political class makes any war divisive. The Iraq war was obviously very divisive, but that’s not unusual in American history. Only World War II was non-divisive. The Civil War, World War I—they triggered big riots; they were divisive. When President Clinton went to the Balkans, the Republicans were upset. When President Bush went to Iraq, the Democrats were upset. The polarization and hatred are so strong that there’s going to be strong opposition somewhere to whatever a President does. If a Democrat had been president and had invaded Iraq, the Republicans would be in opposition. It’s not automatic that the Republicans are the party of spreading democracy and freedom throughout the Middle East. They just happened to be the party in power.

The last few years have seen an ideological unmooring of foreign policy. Why is it that the Republican Party is now the champion of human rights and democratic ideals? That used to be the Democrats’ emphasis. The party in power will behave in a more expansive and aggressive way than the party out of power. We know the normal debates have been going on, and I think the polarization has created its own logic.

■ How do you think U.S. foreign policy has changed the domestic political agenda?

I thought that 9/11 would basically mean an end to the polarization in Washington. If ever you had an exogenous shock to the system that would do that, then that was it. And it lasted about four hours. In part that was President Bush’s fault because he didn’t take advantage of the moment. And in part, maybe there’s just no shock big enough. I think that polarization will have to burn itself out.
When I look at the threats to the United States, there are only two problems that threaten our long-term health: a terrorist group getting a nuclear weapon and the problems caused by the overpromising of our welfare state. How do empires decline? They either get attacked or they get in debt. And right now the burdens of the welfare state really do threaten to crush growth. Neither of these is an exclusively domestic problem, since Europe, Japan, and China all suffer from similar debt burdens. In general, though, I’m quite optimistic about America’s future. Demographically, the United States is a young and healthy country, which is not true of Europe, China, or Japan. Other parts of the world face greater challenges, and our economy is more flexible in dealing with them than theirs.