

[Transcript] The Realignment / 399 | Robert D. Kaplan: America Between Empire & Anarchy in the Greater Middle East

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.
Big news before we dive into this episode. I got married this past weekend.
Liv and I had a small Jewish ceremony in DC with our families.
In a few weeks, we're hosting a bigger celebration in Austin.
But of course, the show must go on.
Today's guest is one of my favorite authors, Robert Kaplan,
who's just released a new book, *The Lume of Time*,
Between Empire and Anarchy from the Mediterranean to China.
We also discussed the other book he released this year,
The Tragic Mind, Fear, Fate, and the Burden of Power.
As an author, Robert combines geopolitical insight
with deep experience on the ground.
He famously wrote about the Balkans in the 1980s
where the region broke out into warfare during the 1990s.
He warned about the coming anarchy of a post-Cold War world,
despite all of the initial triumphalism after the fall of the Berlin Wall,
and in *The Lume of Time*, he offers a conceptualization
of the challenges and dynamics of what he calls the greater Middle East,
though defines geopolitics for the next two decades.
All but said, Sarge and I released our latest Q&A episode this past Friday,
so if you'd like to check that out and submit your own questions
and comments, go to realignment.supercast.com.
Huge thanks to the Foundation for American Innovation for their support.
Hope you enjoy the conversation.
Robert Kaplan, welcome to The Realignment.
It's a pleasure to be here.
Yeah, it's great to chat with you.
You've released two really interesting books this year.
We're going to go in reverse order starting with *The Lume of Time*,
which is out now, given when we're publicizing this episode.
But I also would like to discuss the tragic mind as well.
Let's just kind of get started by placing you a couple guests.
Bridge Colby and Evan Thomas have actually brought you up on episodes
we've done recently, so I think listeners will have heard your name before.
But just kind of looking you up, you've been described as a realist
when it comes to foreign policy, a term which I think for most people
is taken on particular significance after Russia's invasion of Ukraine
and the debates about how the West should respond.
How would you define realism in your approach?
Well, in my approach, first of all, it's a great pleasure to be here with you.
In my approach, I'm a realist in the internationalist sense.
In other words, I look up to people like Henry Kissinger and James Baker
and George Schultz, people who believed in internationalism,

who were engaged in the world, but at the same time understood that there were limits, things that we couldn't do. The United States simply couldn't impose its system of governance everywhere in the world.

What's happened actually since the Iraq war is that realism is taken on a sort of neo-isolationist tinge, which I'm uncomfortable with.

We shouldn't be involved in any of these places. We shouldn't be involved in Ukraine or anything like that. That's wrong. That's not my realism.

My realism is that of the Cold War, where America had national interests. It did not seek to impose or spread democracy everywhere, but yet was deeply engaged in all the continents in the world. Given today's realism, the post-Iraq war realism, I'm sort of half a realist.

In other words, I support the Biden administration in Ukraine. Despite all the criticism it's been getting, it's basically played it right down the middle. In this sense, it's engaged.

It's sending tens of billions of dollars in weaponry. It's the greatest demonstration of US power abroad since the first Gulf War of 1990, 1991. Yet at the same time, there are limits.

They're not giving the Ukrainians everything they want. They're constantly afraid of a war with NATO, of the use of weapons of mass destruction, et cetera. That's the kind of realist I am.

I think that comes through in this new book that I've done, which is about the Greater Middle East.

I think the test case here, because many ways the kind of moderate realism you're advocating for, is one that basically anyone on the face of it, if you're a policymaker, is going to adapt.

I'm realistic. I understand there are limits. The test case is how you actually define those limits. Maybe contextualize this in the case of the Greater Middle East, or even Europe broadly because you brought up Ukraine.

What is something that in a perfect world, you would like the United States to be able to do, but there's just a limit on it that we cannot do? I would like the United States in a perfect world to be able to usher in democracy in most places.

However, it is not a perfect world.

The Arabian Gulf, for instance, is composed of absolute monarchies where, believe it or not, there is a social contract with the population.

The absolute monarchies provide stable, efficient, talented governance and predictable changes of power when a leader dies. In return, the people do not challenge the ruler.

That has led to decades of stability and prosperity in the Persian Gulf, in Saudi Arabia, elsewhere.

It's not a perfect world, so the United States simply cannot.

See, by trying to impose democracy everywhere, what we're really saying is our historical experience is more important than yours.

Take what we have to offer you, and that's wrong.

The historical experience of whatever country you're talking about in this book, Ethiopia, Egypt, elsewhere, is more important for itself than America's historical experience.

In a perfect world, yes.

But in most places, it's a matter of a social contract between ruler and ruled, and that's not always democratic.

Coming off of the end of the 20-year U.S. presence in Afghanistan and obviously the broader backlash against interventionist foreign policy after the Iraq war, this is easily a time where it's easy for us to say, hey, we're going to prioritize democracy promotion just far less than we were before. We're going to focus on stability, those different aspects.

But as you know, we consistently kind of swing in different directions.

So during the Jimmy Carter administration, there's a debate about human rights and how much that matters to U.S. foreign policy.

How do you understand these swings between whether policymakers think this is something we should prioritize and something we shouldn't prioritize, especially given that you're writing about these countries based on your time on the ground? First of all, the swings are worse now than they used to be.

The swings between George W. Bush and Obama, Obama to Donald Trump, Trump to President Joe Biden, these are extreme swings.

During the Cold War, there was much more unanimity between presidential administrations.

Yes, the Carter administration emphasized human rights, but it was basically building on what the Nixon and Ford administrations was able to do with the Helsinki process for human rights in communist Eastern Europe. And the Carter administration still at the end of the day raised the defense budget.

At the time, it seemed like a big swing.

But when we look back upon it, the stability or the similarities between Ford, Carter, Reagan were much greater than the similarities of our recent presidents.

And I think that's because the Cold War basically inculcated a discipline

on presidential administrations, which was lost after the Cold War ended.
Yes, and this is a helpful way of getting at the big narrative question here.
How does the realism you opened with your focus on the greater Middle East,
which obviously would be great to get a definition of what that term means, obviously.
How does that understanding of those two concepts help you kind of offer
a narrative frame for interpreting the world right now?
Because once again, to your point, the Cold War is great.
Not the Cold War is great, but there's a frame.
There's an understanding.
And with understanding, you could have continuity between administrations.
All right, let's define the greater Middle East as I do so in the book.
It starts in Greece and ends in China because it starts and not between Christianity and Islam,
but between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Western Catholicism.
So it starts in Greece and it ends in what the Chinese call Xinjiang province,
but which is really East Turkestan, part of the greater Turkic world.
I start the book in Western China and it includes much of the Arab world,
the Persian world, the Turkic world.
I include Ethiopia because Ethiopia has had a long tradition of involvement
with the Arabian Peninsula, the northern half of Ethiopia.
The language is similar to Hebrew and Arabic.
So I throw that in, but I don't include Israel and Palestine.
It's a strange book in a way because Israel is sort of a cultural outlier in the region.
And the theme of the book is about governance.
It's not really about geopolitics.
It's about governance, not the split between democracy and authoritarianism.
That's our obsession.
That's America's obsession.
It's the split between the legacy of empire in this region and anarchy
and coming up with some middle of the road formula that essentially provides
some sort of acceptable, consultative solution for ruler and ruled.
And Israel has found that middle road, democracy.
It doesn't work well as we've seen in recent weeks and months, but it's there.
It's a system in all the other countries that I deal with.
It's unclear what the system should be or how it could evolve.
And so I'm deliberately on the ground being a reporter in places that are very different from each
other.
Turkey is very different from Egypt.
Egypt is very different from Saudi Arabia.
Saudi Arabia is very different from Iraq and Syria and all.
So that's how I define it.
You know, when we talk about empire,
most people think, oh, the evil crimes of the Western European imperialists,
the British and the French.

But I'm talking about empire as something much older, going back to the Umayyad dynasty in Syria in the seventh century that essentially governed from Morocco to almost to India in a way, like a fourth circumference of the earth and the Abbasid dynasty based in Baghdad, which governed a similar, you know, vast space of area, and the Hopsids and the Fatimids and of course the Ottoman Empire, which governed most of the Middle East for 400 years, more than 400 years. And the British and French only came and come in toward the end of this story. And then of course, there's the US and the Soviets, which were empires in all but name. You know, I, you know, I argue in the book. And this is where I think this kind of coalesces together. You write in the book literally that the, you know, brought in Middle East has not found a solution to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a little over a century ago. And it seems like if we're looking back the past 20 years, democracy promotion was a solution to that issue in terms of like, what could it be thought of as like a frame or a solution to that broader problem? How would you kind of assess the status quo in the Middle East then? Well, look, you know, as I say to people, show me one country in the greater Middle East where democracy has succeeded, you know, for a while, people argued, look at Tunisia, Tunisia slid back into autocracy. You can't really say any country, you know, you know, it's the Arab Spring failed in Yemen, it failed in Libya, it failed in Tunisia so far. It failed in Egypt, it failed in Syria. There's no place where democracy is taken whole. You do, you know, the closest really is Ethiopia, but that's not part of the Arab Spring. You see, you know, and Ethiopia is tremendously unstable with a recent war that, you know, where hundreds of thousands of people were, you know, were driven from their homes. And again, as I said earlier, there's the whole Arabian Gulf, which is stable, which has had peaceful transitions of power, you know, rising living standards without democracy. Where does Turkey fit into this? Well, Turkey's an interesting case. Remember, Turkey is partly European, you know, it's a member of NATO. That's not an accident. Turkey, you know, Turkey's secular system was founded by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk after World War I, and Ataturk took Turkey dramatically to the west culturally. He Latinized the alphabet. He tore the veil off women and a lot of other things. He did.

Then Turkey started moving back towards Islam, you know, especially under the rule of Turgut Ozal in the 1980s and early 1990s. Now, we've had in power for 20 years, Richard Sayyib Erdogan, who's really Islamized Turkey, and has really eroded many of the democratic, you know, the democratic safeguards. So that, you know, as Turk said to me, they said, imagine if Donald Trump had been president for 20 years, what would be the state of the State Department, the Justice Department, the CIA, you know, and America has much stronger institutions than even Turkey.

So Erdogan has really changed things a lot.

Turkey is technically a democracy, but it's a functionally illiberal quasi-autocracy.

The question is, where does it go from here?

Because Erdogan is not getting any younger.

And there's really, I think, two choices.

Because he's done so much damage to institutions,

Turkey after Erdogan could be in a Weimar situation,

like Weimar Germany between the end of World War I and the coming to power of Hitler.

That is a very weak system that was constantly on edge,

or it could revert back to real democracy, you know, under a new leader.

It's unclear.

It's, you know, the wild card is all the damage that Erdogan has done to the independence of institutions.

And that's very hard to calculate how that will affect Turkey in a post-Erdogan future.

And I'm curious then, you also write in the book, though,

that at a broader regional level, political Islam is kind of suffering from a lack of enthusiasm.

So it's interesting that Turkey has obviously moved in a much more, less secular direction.

Yet you're, you know, referencing Iran in the case of the political Islamic project.

Bring that into this then.

Yeah, yeah.

Actually, Iran, Iran is in a way the most optimistic part of my book.

Because I'm saying in the second half of the Iran chapter that Iran really could be a democracy.

You know, it's much more developed, institutionalized, and sophisticated than many parts of the Arab world.

It's Persian.

It has all the building blocks of democracy.

And political Islam is dead in Iran.

Nobody takes it seriously.

The government is hated.

The government is like a bunch of North Koreans who happen to be ruling a country of South Koreans, you know.

You know, so while we associate Iran with extremist Islam, the actual 83 or 84 million Iranian citizens are, they're fed up with that.

And so, you know, it's time for us to start to imagine a post-clerical Iran and Iran beyond the

Ayatollahs.

Just like in the 1970s, people should have started imagining an Iran after the Shah.

How we should start to imagine a world beyond the Ayatollahs because 85 million Iranians, all literate, unleashed could be the next big addition to globalization and investment.

And I think we're going to see something like that in the coming decade.

I'm curious.

And this is where the question of whether regime type matters is significant.

Obviously, the United States and plenty of Gulf countries have serious regional problems with Iran.

Do you think a post-clerical Iran has some of the same similar touch points?

You know, are they still supporting Assad?

Is there a rivalry with Saudi Arabia?

How should we think about that?

No, a post-clerical Iran will change its foreign policy.

A post-clerical Iran will, I think, well, it depends what kind of post-clerical Iran.

You know, you could have a post-clerical Iran with a revolutionary guard ruling things.

And that would still be an equally anti-Western and adventurous foreign policy, but with more freedoms for Iranians to dress as they wish, et cetera, inside their country.

But a truly post-clerical Iran could stop interfering in Iraqi political affairs and lead to, finally, to democratic stability in Iraq.

A post-clerical Iran could be less hostile to Israel, more friendly to the Arabian Gulf countries.

You know, a real change in leadership in Iran could change the Middle East more than anything that we may do or the Chinese may do, et cetera.

And I guess this is where the realism comes about.

Is this essentially a story that has to have nothing to do with the United States then?

Or whether we transition to a post-clerical Iran?

Well, in the book, one of the themes is the emergence of China in the greater Middle East.

The book begins with China, it ends with China.

And everywhere China is involved, not just buying so much oil and gas from Iran and Saudi Arabia, but putting tens of billions of dollars in investment in Egypt and other places.

And I think at the beginning of the Biden administration, they thought that they could deemphasize the Middle East and pay attention to other parts of the world.

That hasn't, well, that's changed.

The Biden administration is fearful of China and the Middle East, finally.

And that's the real impetus of why the administration is trying to forge some sort of an arrangement between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Because, you know, they saw how China had essentially finessed a resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The Biden administration does not want to be left out.

It wants its own geopolitical formula to go along with that.

But still, you know, one of the contentions of the book is, even if those things happen, is that we're finally in a post-imperial Middle East.

You know, all the empires I mentioned earlier in our conversation are gone.

The Americans and the Soviets are not, the Americans are not as intrusive as they used to be

everywhere.

And, you know, and Putin has his own problems with Ukraine and outside of Syria or some other places.

You know, the Russians are not as effective throughout the region as the Soviets were during the Nasser period and the Cold War.

So it's this post-imperial Middle East that has to find a way for itself, essentially, without having some sort of order imposed by outside powers.

And this kind of raises the other big concept in the book's title, which is just anarchy.

Anarchy as the other end of the spectrum from empire.

Right. Yeah. You know, I see anarchy and empire as two extremes.

And the idea is to find something in the middle, you know, so it may be democratic, it may not be, you know, but some sort of governance in the middle that gives people dignity, you know, you know, some some feeling of dignity.

And anarchy is downplayed by Western elites because they've never experienced it.

They know all about dictators, you know, they write all the time about the evils of dictators and authoritarianism.

But anarchy is very abstract to them.

But for instance, you know, Egyptians during a year and a half or so after the downfall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011 experienced the form of anarchy.

That's why when Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took power as the new dictator for the first year or two, he had a honeymoon, because even liberal, you know, Egyptian elites were so terrified and what had happened under the Muslim

Brotherhood that they gave a kind of honeymoon to the new to the new military regime in Egypt.

That's that's passed, but it was very real for a time and, you know, anarchy is always at the edges, you know, I've experienced anarchy in Iraq, you know, in parts of Africa and other places and I can tell you is bad as anarchy is bad as tyranny is anarchy is worse.

Yeah, it's actually going to ask you about that anecdote, because I think you illustrate this dilemma of Western elites through your own engagement and experience of Iraq.

Like in the 1980s, you're seeing Iraq at peak tyranny, which then leads to your position in favor of the Iraq war.

But then obviously, 2003 2006, you experience anarchic Iraq.

Talk, talk about this through that experience.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Saddam Hussein was not just a dictator, you know, to call him a dictator is to miss the whole point.

He was an absolute Stalinist totalitarian, like the regime in North Korea, like the regime in Romania under Chow Chesky.

It was or like, like the Soviet Union in the 1930s, so during the Stalinist purge trials.

So to experience that on the ground as I did firsthand in the 1980s during a number of visits was mind blowing.

It was I couldn't imagine anything worse.

What could be worse than this?

Nothing could be worse than this.

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So that's what led me to support the Iraq war.

Then I went back to Iraq as an embedded journalist in 2004 and in 2005.

And I actually experienced something even worse, which was total anarchy, you know, and that, you know, and that had a powerful effect on me.

You know, you know, people say things like, well, Iraq is held elections.

What does it take nine months to form a government after the elections?

Does electricity work?

Does the water work?

You know, it's easy to, you know, it's easy to make abstract statements about democracy from 6,000 miles away.

But to actually experience how it wasn't working, how it was completely anarchic is life changing.

You know, Iraq was not an abstraction for me ever under both Saddam's tyranny and under anarchy.

I think the question that kind of comes to mind as you're describing this, we focused on a lot of countries that listeners are probably aware of.

But as is clear in your book, you know, you were writing about Western China and the Uighurs in the 1990s and your editor was kind of skeptical of that topic.

Obviously, you famously were writing about the Balkans in the 80s before that became a centerpiece of 1990s foreign policy of all of the different countries and experiences you've had across the greater Middle East.

Could you kind of take, I don't want to say a bet or prediction because people hate those, but like, where do you think is a place that our listeners are probably not heard of?

But in the 2030s, 2040s, they're going to say, oh, I wish I maybe spent more time thinking about this region or this country.

Well, I would say Iran, first of all, to repeat myself, because I think Iran is going to be very different, maybe 180 degrees different by the 2030s and the 2040s than it is now.

And it will be a real hub of global investment in places.

I think Turkey too, because I think Turkey will recover from the air, from the Erdogan era.

The other countries I don't know about, you know, the real, the real question in the Arabian Peninsula is, can these countries make the conversion to a post oil and gas era with, you know, while still remaining prosperous and stable.

And so far, you know, the chances are not too badly, you know, because they've actually been aware of this problem for many years.

You know, that's why Mohammed bin Salman, MBS, the head of Saudi Arabia, why he gave a lot more freedom to women, why he stood, you know, basically was a quiet supporter of the Abraham Accords.

All this had to do with one thing, making Saudi society more entrepreneurial, bringing women into the workforce, having deals with Israel, all to make Saudi Arabia able to sustain a post hydrocarbon future, so to speak.

Tunisia may actually recover from its current bout with autocracy and go back to being a stable democracy like like Spain or Portugal. And I say this because Tunisia has only about 10 million people.

It has no great ethnic splits or sectarian splits. It's not regionally divided with great mountain ranges like Yemen or places like that.

It's close to Europe. You know, it's very, very close and integrated with Europe. It probably has the best chance of any of any place out there. But I think elsewhere, you can, you know, elsewhere, the problem is basic, it's order.

How do we create a new order without order being so oppressive? You know, you know, and what I look at is not bringing democracy to the Middle East, but bringing more consultative governments like in Morocco, Oman and Jordan to the Middle East, because with the exception of empires, the most natural form of governance in the Middle East has been monarchies. You know, that's something people don't want to, Americans don't want to hear, but that, you know, that happens to be true.

So the last question before we transition to a final section on the tragic mind, your other release, is you quote a Belgian politician back in 2019 saying that the current era will not be about countries and nations.

It's going to be about empires. And I actually really kind of didn't understand that quote, just in the sense that so many of the ways that we understand this present moment, especially after Brexit, it's been, it's the nation state, it's not international institutions, it's not regionalism.

Could you help me understand that quote?

Yeah, yeah. First of all, I think that was in a footnote. So you really read the book closely.

Yeah, it was Guy Verhofstadt, a former Belgian Prime Minister, I think, who said that what he was actually referring to in a way is see in other writings of mine, I've defined the European Union as imperial, you know, you know, in the sense that it's governed from far, you know, the government by bureaucrats in far away Brussels determines the diets and a lot of the regulations that places like Greece and Bulgaria at the other end of Europe, so that the European Union is sort of a benign empire, you know, you know, in that sense, in the way that the Habsburg Empire was benign and the Ottomans were benign in many ways. And what he meant was that China, you know, China was always an empire, Russia is rediscovering its imperial roots getting involved in Ukraine, etc.

The European Union, you know, has this imperial tinge to it. You know, if you think of if you replace empire in his statement with like great power, you know, the movements of great powers with their allies and everything, I think it becomes understandable.

Yes, that's very helpful. So, okay, last real section on the tragic mind. What does it mean to think tragically? Well, he raises the beginning of the book and that's the most helpful way to frame it.

Yeah, sure. Tragedy is not common misfortune, which we all go through and which is part of life. Common misfortune is the rule of life. Tragedy is not the triumph of evil over good, because that's actually a clear cut issue.

You know, tragedy is the competition of one good over another good that causes suffering. It's about the narrow choices we face, however vast the landscape.

You know, tragedy is Agamemnon, the Greek, you know, the Greek tribal leader, having to choose between sacrifice, literally physically sacrificing his daughter at the altar to get the support of his forces who demand the death of his daughter to favor the gods.

You know, it means doing that or not doing that and losing power and, you know, his whole family may be losing their life. It's all about narrow binary choices. Tragedy is when a leader has to make the binary choice of to invade or not to invade, even though he may have only 30% of the evidence about what's actually going on on the ground in the place where he wants to invade.

In other words, the situation is given to mysteries. It's very subtle, but he will be judged by a binary choice of doing either or. And this occurs in democratic administration in countries too, not always with war and peace, but with taking various decisions.

I mean, it's I think every day the President of the United States is faced with a number of choices, you know, a number of options, and none of them are good. But you know, he's got to do something. It's about the absence of purely good options, because even if he takes the best option, it's still going to cause this suffering at some level among some part of the constituency.

And, you know, and tragedy is also realizing that the world is imperfect and is beautiful at the same time. You know, there was a great American classicist in the early mid 20th century, Edith Hamilton, who said that not to think tragically is sort of, you know, you know, it's to rob life of its significance.

So that's the sense of tragedy that I explore in this other book.

And I guess, to your point about thinking tragically, I said this to you for the recording, sorry, but I found this book just so helpful because help me just kind of think about things. How do you think a tragic mindset, because I like to think about this in terms of George W. Bush, it's September 11, 2001.

So how would a tragic mindset, or the ability to think that way when necessary, how could that have informed, can't predict the choices he makes, but how could that have informed the way a president would approach a catastrophic situation like that?

Yeah.

Well, it, you know, it's, you know, it's like this, I think, you know, let me switch to Biden for a second. You know, Biden was informed that the Russians really invaded Ukraine, they actually did it, you know, opened up a 600 mile front with three or four tank, you know, tank brigades and prongs. And he had to make a decision, you know, and people were saying Ukraine's not that important. It's not like East Asia, where America has all these economic importance.

No, Biden decided he would help the Ukrainians almost to the limit, but the word almost is crucial there, you know, he wouldn't give them everything they wanted.

He wouldn't, you know, he would always be afraid of the war spreading to NATO. He thought tragically, you know, he may not be able to intellectualize that that's what he did.

In terms of George W. Bush, you know, he had to respond to 9-11 because 9-11 was the greatest attack on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor.

He couldn't not do anything. And given that the terrorists were based in Afghanistan, people forget this now, but the Bush administration gave the Taliban government several, you know, several options, you know, to arrest bin Laden and all this.

But it wasn't just we're going to invade Afghanistan. You know, one, but with the Taliban government not doing anything, they felt they had to do it, you know, you know, invading Iraq was a harder choice than people imagine, because all those Saddam was not supporting, did not have, was not supporting al-Qaeda. He was supporting almost every other terrorist group in the Middle East, and he wouldn't let the UN inspectors in. So there was a, you know, there were reasons. But I think at the end of the day, I think the Bush administration, the younger Bush administration did not think sufficiently tragically when it came to deciding on war in Iraq.

Another word that comes up in the book is what one fears and the fear of being wrong about something. What is something looking out in the next few years that you're afraid you could be

wrong about?

Well, first of all, what I meant was that we should husband fear. We should celebrate. It's good to be afraid, because many of the things we're afraid of don't actually happen, because we take decisions to kind of mitigate the danger, so to speak.

It's the things we don't even think about that tend to happen to us. You know, when you think about life, this is what it is. So fear is a good thing, but you should never be immobilized about fear, so to speak.

I think the thing that some of the things that, you know, that, you know, I always fear as an analyst that you could be wrong, but at the same time, you have to go with what you see in here on the ground, you know, and what you read.

I think the thing that I fear is that Egypt may be in for some really tough times, because the current dictatorship has no answers, essentially, to Egypt, and the population grows, the water resources get smaller and smaller.

So I think I worry about Egypt. I worry that the circle regime in Iran may find a way to hold on to power. You know, just may find a way to hold on to power. I wonder about Tunisia becoming just slipping into permanent dictatorship, so to speak, of Libya not coming back together.

But the overall theme of my book I would call tepidly optimistic, because the very term loom of time, and I explained it early in the book what it means, it's about progress.

But progress is not in a linear direction, and things don't happen in a straight line. There are all these zigs and zags. And if we think that you could have more open regimes in a number of these countries, though not necessarily according to the Western definition of democracy, you can be somewhat optimistic.

So for these last three questions, back to your fear point, I liked your quote when you said, fear is the only way to escape ambition. Can you explain that quote?

Yeah, I think, you know, people in Washington, you know, Washington's a place of ambition. And it's through ambition that we shape and improve the world. So it's good to be ambitious, you know, you know, it's, but I, what I meant was that when you're, you're too ambitious, you're fearing, you're not fearing enough, you're not afraid enough,

because it often happens that what people want, they get, and then they they're destroyed by it, so to speak. You know, everyone wants this job in the Pentagon, and then there's a war that goes badly and their careers are ruined forever. So I think by being wary, by being afraid, you could kind of temper your ambition.

And then to kind of contextualize it for folks, you said that the Eisenhower administration did a great job of balancing fear and ambition together.

Yes, in certain cases. Remember when Eisenhower was the first US president who had many hydrogen bombs at his disposal and never used them, even though his advisors had, you know, open, you know, raised the possibility of him using nuclear weapons on two offshore islands off China, and even though he that's the original Taiwan crisis, right? Right. Yeah, that's the original Taiwan crisis or one of them, you know, the original was upended by the Korean War, you know, it goes goes back a bit further.

But then also, you know, Eisenhower is advised to intervene in Hungary when the when the Soviets put down the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. He chose not to. Eisenhower was a very cautious president, because he was very afraid of nuclear war.

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And he didn't want, you know, he really, you know, because in the fifties, you know, most people assume that at some point these weapons will be used, you know, you know, because everything was new in the fifties.

It was the beginning of the Cold War. Both sides had developed these weapons and weapons that are developed had always been used in the past. So there was this tremendous fear and Eisenhower through his caution.

You know, he didn't intervene in Vietnam in a big way after the French had lost the Dien Bien Phu. So it was, you know, Eisenhower's caution that not only preserve world peace, but also set a means of behavior for other presidents throughout the Cold War in terms of not using nuclear weapons. And to wrap a quote that I think actually I'm going to put on my mental walls and means of judging folks. You say that the first thing you want to do is look at someone's ability to make judgment in crisis rather than just looking at their resume.

This goes to your point about DC people moving on, moving up and up, driven by ambition, focus on character and judgment. So two part question to finish. One, how does one assess character and judgment, like when you're doing that interview and you are just looking at the resume.

But two, how does one then develop character and judgment if you're on the other end of that side? I think you develop, I think people develop judgment by being wrong and making mistakes, because they never, they never make the same mistake a second time, they make new mistakes, you know, that's normal, you know, that's very normal.

What's dangerous is people who have always been right on everything, because, you know, then they don't fear enough. They think they have some omnipotent power, you know, you know, you know, someone like Robert Gates was, I think, a great secretary of defense, because he had held all these smaller positions in government, going back decades, and had seen it all, seen people make mistakes, you know, you know, you know, seen all this. So he came, he came to the office in a way humble, you know, he saw how easy it was to misjudge things. And as a result, I think he did a very good job.

Had Gates come to power as secretary of defense in 04 rather than 06, at the beginning of the younger Bush's second administration, rather than in the middle of it, we may look at the Iraq war differently than we do now, you know, you know, because a lot of the bad things that happened, happened in that, you know, in that bracket between 04 and 06 when Rumsfeld was still the secretary of defense.

That is a really helpful place, Dan. Robert, this has been really great. Could you just shout out the Lume of Time for folks who want to check it out?

Yeah, the Lume of Time between empire and anarchy from the Mediterranean and China. It's a book of travel, memoir, reporting, geopolitics and other things about the greater Middle East.

It's a generalist book. It's not, it's not a restrictive kind of, you know, book on one country or a political science book on one country. It's, you know, it's about a whole region from, you know, you know, taking into account many different disciplines.

Excellent. Thank you for joining me on The Realignment.

Thank you for having me.

Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like the sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year or \$500 for a lifetime membership rates. See you all next

time.

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