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QI Panel:

Book Talk: The Loom of Time & The Tragic Mind

March 5, 2024

12:00-1:00 PM EST

Anatol Lieven 0:37

Hello, everybody. I'm Anatole Lieven, director of the Eurasia program here at the Quincy Institute. And it's my great pleasure and privilege today to introduce Robert Kagan, a name that will be known to all of you to talk about his two latest books. Before I do that, just a couple of announcements. The first is with rubbish and I will talk for about half an hour and then I will pass on questions from you, the audience, could you please write them in q&a, which will find at the bottom of your screens, and then I will pass them on. I apologize in advance if I don't have time for everybody. And if I combine certain questions, I also would like to flag that on March the 14th. But a different time 3pm PST, we will be having another book talk online here at the Quincy with Simon Shuster, the author of a rather brilliant biography of logic, Mr. Lensky, called the showman obviously, of tremendous consequence, given the present situation in and around Ukraine, so I hope you will all be able to, to attend that. So today we are talking with Robert Kagan, about Robert outlines to two new books published last year, a reproach to all of us book writers. The Trump might be a thief date and the burden of power and the loom of time and parent anarchy on between the Mediterranean and China. So, welcome, Robert, it's a great pleasure to have you with us. I thought I'd begin with the tragic mind. Because it has often occurred to me that Western culture in general, contemporary culture, recent culture, call it liberal, if you will, but more generally, and perhaps American culture in particular, has a real problem with tragedy with the notion that, as you wrote in your book, there can be a clash between two goods, both of them good in their own way, or both of them sincerely held, of course, by rival countries, rival groups. Because, of course, that challenges the teleology of progress on which so much of our culture has been based to do you think that indeed, this teleology demands the kind of black and white good and evil approach, which you critique in book? Are we getting beyond that? Can we get beyond that?

Robert Kaplan 3:34

Well, first of all, Anatole, it's a pleasure to be here with you. It's Robert Kaplan. Not Kagan, as you said.

Anatol Lieven 3:43

Sorry, Oh, my God, that's probably a Freudian slip. Well, no, yeah no, I don't think Dr. Kagan would agree to appear on this.

Robert Kaplan 3:59

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Anyway, tragedy is not common misfortune, or a vile crime, like the Holocaust or something. Things like the Greeks dismissed communism as fortunate as the very stuff of life. And it's the things like the Holocaust or Rwanda, they had no answer to they couldn't even imagine it. Not to think from their conception of tragedy, as you said, is about one good choosing one good over another good that causes suffering. And that tragic not to think tragically, to assume the world can be perfected, is sorted. Yeah, it's very sorted. Because to think tragically, is to think in a sublime fashion accord, according to the Greeks. And I think our elites today have trouble with tragedy for a number of reasons. First, first off, listen to this. We, America is a country of optimists. But precisely because their institutions were devised by pessimists. The Founding Fathers of the American Revolution, and is specifically in the Federalist Papers by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison thought of thought obsessively about everything that could go wrong in a state, that, you know, they took pessimism to it to an alt to an ultimate level mean everything that could go wrong they, they thought about, and therefore they devise the system with with everything that could go wrong in mind, based often, among others, by Machiavelli, and Hobbes. And they came up, and they did such a good job that they produced a nation of Optimists because relatively little did go wrong, you know, for a very long time, yes, there was a civil war and other things, but generally, it worked, it worked very well. And so Americans had been, especially the elite have, you know, have come up with this notion that because America's experience with mass democracy has been so positive, that it needs to export it around the world, because it's, it's America's experience that counts, not the historical experience of the Iraq or Egypt or some other nation, you can name our experience is more important than theirs, even though the country we're talking about is theirs, essentially. So that's, that's one element of it. The other element is that there are competing goods in this world. That's why policymakers have tough choices to make. You know that, you know, the right of the citizenry of the voters is one good, the right of helping helping people around the world in a humanitarian fashion is another good, often those goods don't call and often those goods don't coincide. Though it's a matter of choosing one over the other, that causes suffering, meaning you can't do everything. And that is that is ultimately what tragedy is about, and what our elites have such trouble with, because they think they can do everything and they and they can't. And also, another element of tragedy is that no matter how vast the landscape, the ruler has often a very narrow binary choice to make, you know, which can be to invade or not to invade, to intervene or not to intervene. And he's basing his judgment on only 20 or 30% of the evidence, because that's all that's available to him or her at that time. Whereas the situation itself is given to mysteries to ambiguities to unknowables. But he or she is leader will be judged completely on what the 20 or 30% He knows, at a certain moment in time. And because those decisions often are wrong decisions for understandable reasons. That's where tragedy comes in.

Anatol Lieven 8:38

Yes, the tragedy of good intentions, the the tendency to cast the world, outside America as black and white, rather than in many ways, a history of of tragic conflicts, it seems to me, you know, I like to critique this for many years. More recently, I've been struck by the degree to which this is now being applied within the United States to US history. That as part of the the accounting with the darker sides of Americans, rather than an appreciation of the tragic service, you have in

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certain quarters, a tendency, well, if you take the Native Americans for example, previously demonized as a semi midgets by American culture, white culture, including progressive cultural past. Now, of course, when there is the movement, quite rightly to correct that, but that cannot be a shade of grey. Now, the Native Americans have to be entirely pure and peaceful, peace loving and good. and all the evil is put on the side of the whites. And of course, this extends now, on both sides political line more widely within America. This I have to say I find a deeply worrying phenomenon. I mean, it's obviously bad enough in international affairs. But when you get this somehow in to a sense of good versus evil really takes over, as opposed.

Robert Kaplan 10:30

Yeah, and getting towards and, you know, Anatol, we've both been foreign correspondents. And when you're a foreign correspondent, traveling around the world, you don't see perfect democracies, or the most horrific dictatorships, you see a lot of gray shades and between dictatorships that actually provide a safer living, you know, more stability in order than invent very imperfect democracies in some point, you know, it's a world of gray shades. And that's the world and that's American history, too. In many ways, it's about seeing distinctions. That that is most important. And one of the things I tried to do in my second book, you're talking about the loom of time is to write about the greater Middle East in terms of distinctions in terms of is there not all horrible dictatorships, one is worse than the other, actually, you know. And second is better than the other, you know, you can actually rank dictatorships or democracies in terms of human rights. And this, it's not just, it's not binary, it's not one or the other.

Anatol Lieven 11:47

Before we come to the loom of time, I just wanted to ask one more question about the, the tragic mind in in that book, you write very moving about your personal sense of responsibility for what you wrote in Balkan ghosts, about ethnic and ethno religious conflict in the Balkans. And the, your fear that it has been widely reported this, this book had a significant effect on President Clinton, in discouraging him from an earlier intervention in in Bosnia. Now, on the other hand, I have to say, somebody, not nearly as much as you, but did traveled quite extensively in the Balkans in the past, I find your book overwhelmingly accurate, as compared to some of the advocates, only some of the bits of course of intervention, one of whom I vividly remember at a conference declaring that Bosnian Muslims and Serbs lived in peace for hundreds of years, until Milosevic divided them, which of course, for not just for a historian, but anyone who has actually had a conversation with the person there is such unbelievable nonsense. So what I wanted to ask was, is there also a tragic contradiction between the duty of the journalist or the added, sometimes and the duty of the official or the citizen. In other words, almost in the Hindu sense of dharma, that it is, it is the duty of the of the journalist to pursue the truth, whereas it is the duty of the well, the set of them, who knows systems comes in different forms the duty of the official to pursue the interests of the state, as as can be made compatible with the interests of humanity, but are the is this also a tragic clash of duties?

Robert Kaplan 14:03

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Yes, it is, you know, a long years ago, but 25 years ago, I interviewed the late Harvard professor Samuel Huntington. And one of the things he said to me stayed with me he said the job of a journalist or an analyst or a professor is not to improve the world it's to say what he or she thinks is actually going on and which I thought was perfectly put and and that's what I tried to do in bulk and ghosts not improve the world but say honestly, what I thought was actually going on in it and lo and behold, Balkan ghost was serialized in the Atlantic not only before the war started, but before the Berlin Wall even fell, so to speak. So I think, you know, it's, it's, it's dangerous when journalism gets to conflated with humanitarian is because then and it will take sides. And the sides may look the right side at the moment. But looking back 20 years later, it may look like the wrong side. Yeah. Because the way the way that nobody knows the direction of history or where things are going, so that I think the job of the journalist is exactly what Sam Huntington said, you know, to say what he or she thinks is going on in the world, not not Not, not what he wants to go on. It's the job of the policymaker to make decisions on and that gets us back to what I said earlier, where you get into the tragic binary decisions where knowing only 20 or 30% of the evidence where make where you have to make a decision. That's one of the cruelties of leadership, you know, but which the decision is, you know, cannot be based on, on all on all the evidence?

Anatol Lieven 16:00

Yes, because I mean, otherwise, it if you begin by presenting publics and of course, also politicians, who rely on media to a great extent, with what are in fact, then it becomes impossible, actually, to reach a rational decision, because even the 30% of the evidence is flawed. I, myself, you know, vividly remember this from the early days in Afghanistan, when, in order to persuade, at that stage, very skeptical, public's in the West, that it was necessary to have a presence in Afghanistan, where Western officials would would present completely fantastical pictures of Afghan society and, and history. But of course, in the long run, that didn't, that didn't work, because they were they were exposed as fantasies. Whereas perhaps, you know, a more honest and accurate portrayal at the start would have, I mean, we would still have intervened we had to after 911, but it would have been based on more realistic premises and perhaps had a better result. Yeah. Yeah. To come to the loom of time. In I wanted to ask it, if there is a contrast or even some degree of contradiction between this work and your your, your work that the coming anarchy, because in the loom of a good deal of the loom of time is about empires and geopolitics. Whereas the coming anarchy is much more about the decay or fragmentation of societies and states and the threat of, of collapse. And, of course, especially in Europe, but actually in the United States as well, if you look at what's happening in in Central America and hated by God, you see threats which come from a very different Well, the sources that you precisely described him coming out. I mean, is there a case for saying that if China could take over the Middle East and regulated, that would be fine. But that actually China can't because amongst, amongst other things, all the features of that region, which had frustrated America's attempts to bring?

Robert Kaplan 18:40

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Yeah, exactly. There is a confluence between the loom of time and the coming anarchy. And this gets back to the tragic mind, because the Greeks what the Greeks feared the most was anarchy. And they even invented a god to represent anarchy, the Anisa style and ISIS act because the Greeks were too rational not to know that the non rational or irrational also deserves a place in the world. You know, that a Western elites don't think that way. But the ancient Greeks did that. You had to recognize the power of the irrational of the anarchic, irrational, essentially. And what I'm dealing with in the loom of time is a number of states that don't work very well, for very accurate. Yeah, for very different reasons. And that's why I do deep dives, you know, to show the different reasons. You have turkey, which is a de facto autocracy, you have Egypt which is, you know, where you have another NASA right Pharaoh leading a regime that's going nowhere essentially, but is afraid to open up society because the military needs to control the economy, you have Ethiopia, which has a lot of potential, but which is mired in regional warfare. And to me, um, one of the great successes in the Middle East is something that American elites could, you know, feel very uncomfortable with. That's the Gulf shake thems and the Saudi Arabian system. Because the Saudi system, you've had the same family and power for over 100 years and a half a dozen changes of government when the leader dies or whatever. And it's never resulted in an instability or disorder. And it's provided capable, moderate conservative, you know, leadership where people lead, lead very reasonably good lives with, you know, with a lot of predictability. And there's basically a social contract between the regime which gives people you know, a stable, you know, efficient system, and the people who do not challenge the regime, and that's about the best you can hope for in the middle east of today. And I'm saying and the loom of time is about progress, indirect work, you know, backwards and forwards progress that leads to better that can lead to better regimes, but not necessarily democratic ones. Because the fear is anarchy, whether you are in Egypt or Saudi Arabia, when you really get down to talking with leaders in their advisors in a systems they fear chaos.

Anatol Lieven 21:39

Yeah, one night of chaos is worse than 100 years of tyrannies.

Robert Kaplan 21:44

Well, that's a very true obvious exaggeration, as I put it in the tragic mind, but it gets the point home.

Anatol Lieven 21:54

And, of course, what you said about Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia is much bigger, but you could also say, for Qatar, and the UAE, and Kuwait, and Oman, the it was remember from what you were saying about us achievement in that region. You know, the United Arab Emirates, long ago was called the truth on that, because the British Empire introduced a truce between the different shakeups which had been fighting each other, and everybody else for many, many hundreds of years. So yes. But it strikes me and perhaps there is also a worrying lesson here for America,

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that in so several of these countries, you have certain elements of democracy, even in Egypt, to a very limited degree. But because you have a situation in which very large parts of the population have absolutely radically fundamental differences about the very nature of the state to what the state should be in society shouldn't be that's something that democracy cannot resolve. So in all these cases, do you have an element of democracy but an authoritarian, but at the same time, some measure of an authoritarian system at the top which says thus far and no firm? Yeah, this is the basic nature of the state. Muslim, Sunni nationalists ethno nationalist in Turkey, secular in Egypt, fear Iranian nationalist in Iran, and that cannot be changed by elections. Elections have to take place within that framework.

Robert Kaplan 23:42

In fact, Anatol election, a stable democracy basically shows that everyone agrees on the big questions already. And there is no reason to debate though, what becomes debated is the size of the budget, you know, what, you know, basically, you know, about regulation, import export, it's the lesser things that are debated in a stable democracy, because the major issues have been resolved by common consensus. That was the case in the United States until recently, you know, essentially, and that's what made the United States successful. And, and just one point I'd like to make about anarchy, which is one of our leads, they fear, tyranny, because tyranny ends the battle of ideas. It ends the debate over ideas, and because our elites live by ideas, their greatest fear is not being able to express them. But they've never been at a roadblock in Chechnya during the war. You know, they've never been at a roadblock in Sierra Leone during the Civil War. So they don't know what anarchy is. They've never had any help. whole experience with it. So therefore they cannot fear it in and that's that's the basic divide. But yes, in terms of democracy, it's when the big issues are already resolved that a successful democracy can happen.

Anatol Lieven 25:15

Yes. It's often struck me that that is a fundamental difference between the elites in America and not just in Russia and China, but in India, too, that there there is a historically derived sense of the fragility of the state. And even when I was a student, and then a journalist in India, in the 1980s, large areas, North Indian was slipping into caves as a result of the caste war. And people were very well aware of that. And of course, it it. Yeah. It does create support for board. Yeah. Which, yes, I think he's not fully upset.

Robert Kaplan 26:01

Even Isaiah Berlin knew this, you know, the greatest liberal philosopher of the 20th century, he said, When men don't have enough food to eat, when they're physically not safe, you cannot expect them to debate the rights and privileges of a free press, they have more important things on their mind. You know, that's not an exact quote. But that is what he basically said, you know, all this liberal debate is assuming, it's assuming there already is basic order in a society and therefore you can debate about higher principles.

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Anatol Lieven 26:38

In one problem, which you allude to in the book, is the decline of study of history, which could teach people different, but something that's often struck and surprised me in America is the lateral, if you watch the water, or the subprime, you know, Hollywood has done a very good job, perhaps an exaggeration, but still, you know, of portraying this kind of world in areas of America itself. When I was doing a briefing, Congress on On Afghanistan, after 911. I would sometimes point and I would say, But gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen, units, you only have to walk 15 blocks east, you know, and you'll find yourself in a world which, you know, would teach you something about what Afghanistan is really. But it didn't seem to sink in.

Robert Kaplan 27:32

No, because people make judgments and have beliefs based on their own personal experience systems, and if their own personal experience systems is to grow up with a modest degree of financial privilege and stable lives. You know, all of this stuff that we've been talking about is abstract.

Anatol Lieven 27:54

Yeah, very, very true. My last question, and then I'll go to the audience. But, of course, your book was written before the latest disaster between Israel and the Palestinians, starting, of course, with the the Hamas terrorist attack. How do you think this relates to what you were writing about in your book? And what do you see the repercussions of this for the region that you're you're writing about?

Robert Kaplan 28:23

Yeah, well, it's actually very fortunate on my part that I did not write about Israel and the Palestinians in the book, because I would have gotten it wrong. You know, nobody could have predicted this. There is a quote from the head of the Arab League who I interviewed in Cairo, who told me and it's in the book, that you cannot have a stable Middle East, as long as millions of Palestinians don't have the best some degree of basic rights. So that's in the book, but generally, the book, I avoided the topic not to avoid it, but because it's, you know, the books about getting to the you know, you know, doing a survey of about six or seven states. And there there are difficulties in getting to a happy medium between tyranny on one hand and anarchy on the other. And, and Israel's out of the picture on that issue, because it's been a democracy since 1948. However badly it's performed in this in that, but I think that I think that the, the relationship between what's going on now in my book is that the longer this war goes on, the more pressure it brings to bear on regimes in Egypt, in Saudi Arabia, and other places that I wrote about, and how that could upset the fragile balance in those countries. It probably won't. But it might. In other words, you know, you have leaders in Egypt and Saudi Arabia who is sent Julian, this is an exaggeration, but it makes a point who basically go to bed each night hoping that the Israelis crush Hamas and wake up in the morning and make pronouncements all day proclaiming the

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opposite, you know, you know, as you know, as you know, essentially, because what they want is, you know, they, you know, they're very what, you know, they their status quo regimes, they don't want the order to change, essentially. And the status quo entails a reasonable relationship with Israel, whether it's official or non official, in the case of Saudi Arabia, but what this war is doing is it's putting pressure on this web work of relationships and these regimes which have been stable, but could go become unstable, you know, you know, if the war would it continue at this level of ferocity?

Anatol Lieven 31:05

So first question from the audience about America from Harlan. He says, perhaps Hamilton company did not go far enough in that pessimism. One could argue that constitution checks and balances no longer work, because compromise and civility are long gone. And political extremism has made the country irreversibly divided in some ways as bad or worse than 1860. Because this applies to virtually every issue, large or small. Do you agree with that? And do you have any sort of remedial actions in mind?

Robert Kaplan 31:40

Yeah, well, that's a big question. I would say, a very big question. I would say that what makes it worse than the 1860s it's not regionally divided. In other words, it's not that everyone on east of the Mississippi likes Biden, and everyone west of the Mississippi likes Trump, you know, it's much more mixed up than that, which makes it more explosive on one hand, and less explosive, in some senses on the other. Because when you do have hatreds tied to region, then you can get to civil war or something like that. But I think what's happened is a lot of it, you know, people blame it on on China, you China's taken advantage of the World Trade Organization hurt American jobs, Iraq War, there's a whole list of about six or seven things that are given to explain the Trump phenomenon. But I think there's something more basic, it's that globalization itself has split America into between a elites and upper middle class whiskey sipping elites on one hand, who is swept into this global world, and have friends and contacts and loyalties that even outside the United States and interests outside the United States, and another half of the of America, which wants no part of that world because it first of all, it cannot compete, it doesn't have the social sophistication, it doesn't have the income level, etc. And they're sort of left behind to inhabit a more lumping nation state where they, you know, where they may have, you know, a lot of good arguments to make, but they lacked the the the expertise to make them happen in a very organized civil fashion.

Anatol Lieven 33:39

Yeah, yes, of course, the end of well, didn't last in America for very long, but military service has not helped because it's always struck me, the kind of content directed at the less educated working classes, we now call them yet again, in America would not have been possible for the generation after the Second World War. Because you could Well, partly because So, in those days, so many members of the elites had actually thought alongside fellow Americans in that

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war, unlike in Vietnam, for example, but also because you simply could not look at the men who had stormed the beaches of Normandy and raise the flag at the flag on Iwo Jima. You didn't do that. Now, of course, you can. Perhaps the reason but it's not a recipe for a civilized national discussion. Yeah. Question from Jonathan Taplin. In your book, *The coming anarchy*, you likened American elites to a few rich people riding a limousine through a bombed out in a city. Do you still feel that that is an appropriate metaphor for our relations with what we used to call the third world I didn't quite know what we call it

Robert Kaplan 35:00

Yeah, well, the limousine metaphor was not mine. Originally it was in its in the coming anarchy, I quote, a Canadian political scientist, Thomas Homer Dixon, that was his, you know, his, his analogy, and I think it was rather brilliant for the time, because he meant it psychologically, in a way, not just physically. And other words, you know, the elites live inside, you know, like a womb where everything works where the children go to top schools, you know, yeah, they have a lot of worries and problems, but they're kind of the problems of, of the well worried, you know, you know, we'd like to say, an outside life is getting worse and worse, you know, and, you know, outside, you have a world where people can't make ends meet, where things don't work as well as they used to, from their point of view, where wages have stayed, you know, stagnated and all that, and then you have the elite inside the bubble or the limousine. So it's a very rough, you know, it's like many metaphors or analogy. It's very rough and inaccurate in some parts, but it gets the point across and I think it's still quite valuable.

Anatol Lieven 36:20

A question, I mean, closely linked to that, looking around the world today, what are your best examples of chaos on a national scale?

Robert Kaplan 36:36

On the national scale, that's a hard one to think about. Because I live in the elite bubble, you know, so to speak. And it's been about four years since I've traveled, you know, are around around the country for for other books, but it's not so much chaos, as it is just a worse and worse lifestyle, you know, places, places where people where there's no, for instance, I was in this town in 2015, in Ohio, you know, traveling across the country, and the whole downtown was shattered, and just empty, you know, and this wasn't alone. This was one of many downtown's in the Ohio River Valley that had completely boarded up where there was no life whatsoever. And yet, then I went to one town on the Ohio River Valley, Marietta, Ohio, because it was a small town with a very well regarded private college, that was like part of the global world, with fine restaurants, nice streets, all because of this college was attracting students from all over the world, and was in a different zone, you know, in so many ways than all the other towns I saw on the Ohio River Valley.

Anatol Lieven 37:58

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And if you look at America's neighbor, you could say at I suppose a very extreme case, but but only a more extreme case of what one can also see in places like El Salvador, in terms.

Robert Kaplan 38:13

Yeah, look, there's a lot of aspects to our southern border crisis, a lot of aspects. But one aspect is basically the failure of not Mexico, but of states like El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, where there's less and less real governance, more and more organized crime and gang, you know, and get in gangs, type intimidation, where people do not feel safe. You know, they're basically fleeing anarchy and using Mexico as a transit country to get through to the north, Mexico is actually quite sophisticated. It has a big problem with drugs. We all know that, but it's not a Mexican problem. It's a Central American chaos problem. You know, so to speak. Haiti, of course, is is an extreme disaster. I mean, it you know, it's literally governed by gangs. You know, you can't say that for many other places in the world, really. But it's, it's the failure of governance in like the middle part of Central America. That has been one of the aspects fueling the southern border crisis.

Anatol Lieven 39:29

On that school, do you feel that perhaps, for the sake of America itself, and, you know, its hegemony, its success in ts own neighborhood, would it make sense, but for the United States to concentrate far more on trying to help Central America and perhaps pay less attention to places which are after all a very long way from America's shore.

Robert Kaplan 40:01

I raised that point in my book, The revenge of geography, which ended with Mexico. It ended with Mexico and Central America and said that, you know, here's the issue, you know, you know, here, you know, here, here's the real issue. I would say that that makes sense, theoretically, you know, but in actual fact, I don't, it doesn't matter how many how much money we throw at places like El Salvador, and Honduras, a much of the money will be stolen, you know, it will just go to waste. Because, you know, people always say, let's have a Marshall Plan for this part of Africa, let's have a Marshall Plan for this part of Central America, people forget that when the original Marshall Plan was actually promulgated, it was promulgated in basically societies that had known for generations, middle class bourgeoisie life that had been interrupted by a war, you know, of half a decade or so. But that because there was this middle class bourgeoisie culture, you know, that, you know, institutions could spring up with there was very little corruption and massive amounts of money could be funneled through without it being stolen or misappropriated or something, you know, that, you know, that's that you know, that you know, what existed even in bombed out Germany, or, you know, or civil war Greece in the late 1940s, is still a higher level of civil administration than exists, say, in parts of Central America.

Anatol Lieven 41:40

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It used in the run up to the Iraq war, I have to say, it used to drive me crazy to hear people say, of course, we can build not just accessible democratic state, but you know, build a state, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, because after all, we did this in Germany and Japan, where as you say, you had not not as the bourgeoisie, but you had the most efficient bureaucracies in Europe and Asia respect.

Robert Kaplan 42:09

Well, the analogy I use them, which is only partially right, you know, and I got a lot wrong with Iraq, is the Philippines, not the Marshall Plan. But us invading the Philippines in 1899, is basically we built the state in the Philippines, and we split, we stayed in one form or another for decades, and built the state and the state became very, very corrupt and unstable compared to others in the Far East at the time. But eventually, democracy did take hold. And, uh, but it was touch and go. I mean, the Philippines only recently has become economically dynamic, you know, in history, but the Philippines is was America's original colonial experience, so to speak, and it had a lot of successes and a lot of failures. And it's worth studying.

Anatol Lieven 43:05

Yep, good point. Continuing with the Middle East, what do you think, will be the effects of East Asian economic development in the Middle East? Especially in Iran? If indeed China becomes more interested? Yeah. Well, and do you think that countries in that region will eventually have to choose between America and China? Especially if it comes down to a choice between American security and Chinese trade?

Robert Kaplan 43:42

Well, that's where it is because China is already the big I believe the biggest purchaser of both Iranian and Saudi oil and natural gas, Iran. China is building a massive economic zones in the Suez Canal and Egypt, you know, building Egypt's new capital east of Cairo, you know, a military base in Djibouti. China has ambitions in the Middle East did go beyond pure economic development and business partnership on the you know, China, you know, China sees the Middle East is integral to its Belt and Road Initiative. And while some will just dismiss Belt and Road as a failure, I don't because Belt and Road is basically a Chinese grand strategy. And in a grand strategy, you don't get everything right you get things wrong, you withdraw you advance you make changes. It's it's constant fiddling a grand strategy is just the direction and in that sense, Belt and Road is very much alive. Saudis have told me that they liked the Chinese because the Chinese come with their big investment money and don't give the Saudis lectures about democracy and other moral things. So they prefer dealing with the Chinese to the Americans. But as you said in your question, the Saudis don't have an easy choice, because the Americans do provide security, something that Chinese are not up to yet at this point. But I think the Chinese are very happy letting America take the lead role in trying to resolve this current Gaza, you know, Israel war, and the Chinese will sit back and reap the financial rewards, you know, in terms of you know, if there's a rebuild Gaza, because Gaza has a long sea coast,

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remember, imagine what Lee Kuan Yew could have done with Gaza? You know, you know, it, you know, if he had gotten it, you know, don't laugh. We're in the middle of a war, but 10 years from now, Gaza could be very well developed. And you could be a big Chinese presence there. I believe that Chinese already run one or two of Israel's port complexes?

Anatol Lieven 46:04

Well, I mean, there have been several questions to do with this. But it is very difficult to imagine, certainly the present Israeli government, well, the existing Israeli political configuration allowing anything like that.

Robert Kaplan 46:27

Yeah. It you know, Israel's political configuration is somewhat of an unknowable because three out of four Israeli voters in recent polls have wanted Netanyahu to out wanted Netanyahu out. On the other hand, the fact that the Israelis withdrew from Gaza and, you know, 819 years ago, took out a ejected 9000 Jewish settlers 19 years from now, so that Gaza was in effect in a de facto sense already an independent Palestinian state and look what they did with it has driven in it many Israelis to the right, you know, don't you dare withdrawal from the West Bank? You know, you know, turn it into a Gaza. So, you know, the recent polling and votes in the Knesset show vast drifts to the right. But at the same time, there's tremendous voter dissatisfaction with the current prime minister. So it's, it's it's an unknowable as to what future elections may bring in Israel. I do know that after the 1973 War, there was a comeuppance, you know, you know, the Labour Party, which had governed the country since 1948, but which was responsible for the debit debacle of the 1973. War was thrown out of power, and that brought in the, you know, the right wing for decades. So there will be a political I think, earthquake because of this war, but we're not there yet.

Anatol Lieven 48:01

But it's the I mean, given the statements, you know, obviously from the court, but also from the Israeli right, in general. And given the seven policies pursued under Labor, starting labor, is a two state solution now, conceivable. Can it happen?

Robert Kaplan 48:24

I think it can happen in Gaza, because there already was a two state except the one state was ruled by Hamas. That was the problem. The West Bank is problematic is if you look at a map of the West Bank, all you see his ink blocks of ink blots of Jewish settlements. And so I think it'd be very, very, very hard. I do know that the, you know, again, after 1973, because the Israelis, the biggest mistake of 1973, was Israeli hubris. They didn't think that Siddharth had the strategic creativity to invade, cross the Suez Canal and not advance further but just sit there, you know, just to occupy the, you know, the, you know, the, the the east bank of the canal and make it impossible for the Israelis to pull them out. So that because of that, you know, Misty that who

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Ristic mistake Israel paid for it, it ultimately lost the whole Sinai in negotiations, essentially, and part of the Golan Heights. I think there will be I think there will be you know, there will there will be a come up in Swift, you know, with this, I think that parts of the Israeli political spectrum, like maybe 50% or 60%, want, you know, we'll want a solution of some sorts that prevents a future October 7 at and that does not mean Israelis ruling Gaza.

Anatol Lieven 50:07

We have a question related to the meaning of the tragic, referring to William Appleman Williams' thesis, but the tragedy of American diplomacy qualifies as tragedy precisely because it grew out of American success, successes, home victory and Second World War. But now, it seems that the American elites face a world situation in which political will both countries but political models other than America's are proving equally or more successful. Can America adjust itself to multipolarity can the American elites adjust their minds to the need to coexist with equally strong powers in different regions of the world? But will this the tendency towards multipolarity drive the American elites towards greater rationality or greater erection?

Robert Kaplan 51:17

I think that there cannot be a Pax Americana a global Pax Americana, there can be a global system, though, you know, just as there was a Cold War system that did not lead to great power conflict during the Cold War, you know, so that can happen and elites can adjust to it. But it will be very hard, because it's the mindset of the elites, I think, and this is very understandable, that who are the heroes, of policymakers? In the, you know, in the Biden administration, when they read books, who were their heroes, they're people like George Marshall, and, you know, and Dwight Eisenhower, and, and, and Henry Stimson, and people like that people who got things done, you know, Avril harem, and the wise men after World War Two, they got things done, and they made a Pax Americana, in a way. But they did that because America dominated the world economically, then, America was the only part of after World War Two, the only developed country that had not seen its basic infrastructure bombed and destroyed during the war, because geography had granted America a great advantage. You know, England, China, the Soviet Union, they were what Europe, you know, France, Germany, were all destroyed in terms of infrastructure, America was not harmed in the least. And that's what gave American elites the ability in the post war decades up until Vietnam, you know, to eventually manage the world, that those advantages don't exist anymore. If you look at the trade figures, you know, you know, of the extent that America dominates the world economy, it's much, much smaller now than it was then. So getting used to a kind of, I wouldn't say multipolarity, because that implies that you know, that the bipolar system has ended. I think, you know, that India and Brazil carry as much weight as the United States and China, I don't think we'll have that but a system where America is not dominant, but just has to seek advantage, so to speak, by balancing one power off against the other somewhat like Nixon and Kissinger attempted to do with the opening to China and 72.

Anatol Lieven 53:53

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But, you know, I mean, Eisenhower, of course, was president during the absolute peak of American prosperity and global economic dominance. But, I mean, he also knew that coming out of his own experience as a soldier acted with notable prudence. I mean, in your book, you critique American hoopers. Eisenhower was very far from cubistic, in that sense, and I have to say, I think it's hard to imagine Eisenhower committing himself to a program, which implies expelling Russia from its base at Sevastopol, or indeed has been on record, putting American foreign policy quite much in the pocket of Netanyahu as the Biden administration seems to have done.

Robert Kaplan 54:47

Yeah. Remember that the Biden administration it's may look quite different when it's out of power and we see the memoirs and what actually happened because it made be that the Biden administration was prudently worried about Russian use of nuclear weapons if the Ukrainians conquered Crimea, you know, and therefore, yeah, and therefore, the Biden administration, so called spoon fed approach to arming Ukraine, rather than a full throttle approach may turn out to have been based on on a realism, you know, on, you know, on actual real fears, because remember, when you're the National Security Adviser, your biggest responsibility is protecting the physical and economic state of the United States, you know, and it's, and its citizens and nuclear weapons use rates very high on that, you know, and so sometimes you may have to overcompensate and make mistakes, in order not to let that happened. It's a matter of choosing the lesser evil, which gets back to, you know, the real meaning of tragedy. So I'm not sure the Biden administration is going to look hubristic from hindsight, you know, given five or eight years, you know, the first Biden administration, it may look better. Remember, Netanyahu has been very difficult, you know, he made you know, he basically made a fool out of John Kerry, you know, you know, you know, who sought to bring, you know, Kissinger was much more of an incrementalist in the Middle East. That was the key to his success. He didn't go about trying to solve the Palestinian problem. He just wanted little bits of disengagement accords that brought the both parties to a new beginning, so to speak. And I think the administration is in a very difficult position in the Middle East, because October 7th, the very ferocity and intensity of those attacks on October 7, may have changed the Israeli calculus regarding what it can, what it can tolerate, not just from the Gaza, Palestinians, but from Iran, from Hezbollah, etc. And we haven't seen the result of that change calculus yet.

Anatol Lieven 57:17

Changes Israeli calculations, but Ike would have said that that was irrelevant, that the questions we asked is, what are Americans? Yeah, and I also say, I don't think that anyone would have dared to make to try to make a fool of Ike. As he demonstrated, you know, overseers in 56, when he felt the British, the French and the French had been mind.

Robert Kaplan 57:41

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Eisenhower had been the Supreme, you know, had basically been the commander of Europe in World War Two, the commander of D Day, he had a lot of credibility. People didn't challenge him, you know, Biden is not in that situation at all. And, and I, during the 56th, war was dealing with states that were inherently legitimate, you know, with, you know, Israel Nasser's Egypt, you know, a excetera, what's going on? Now, you're dealing with a movement, that is not a state that has no limitations, that doesn't, you know, that may not demand that, you know, that may not deserve the level of legitimacy that, that for that Americans, you know, awarded not just Nasser but Sadat during the 73 War crisis.

Anatol Lieven 58:36

But it's just a reality.

Robert Kaplan 58:39

This is the reality. And we'll see if we get a ceasefire, you know, what I'm watching from, from the perspective of the loom of time, is does the Egyptian regime crack, you know, does it withdraw recall its ambassador from Israel. So far, what's been interesting to me is what's not happened? The Egyptian regime has stayed firm, the Saudis have given signals that they still envision a post war, rapprochement with Israel. We've seen no great pro Palestinian demonstrations in Iran, because the Iranian regime there is so hated that any policy associated with the regime is also hated. So I think the biggest worry at this point is that the war will spread to southern Lebanon, because you have I think it's 80,000 Israelis not living in their homes, but you know, but living in hotels and places south of the border because it's unsafe for them to live in their homes. And that's a kind of de facto loss of sovereignty, that you know, that states don't tolerate for long.

Anatol Lieven 59:56

Yes. And I have to say a awful lot more Palestinians in Gaza are not living in their homes and hotels. I mean, final question, I suppose just how much if at all, does American moral prestige count in the world? Here in Washington, it seems to count for a great deal. But by now, one must have an impression that people in the West are largely talking to themselves, and respectfully, hardly exists outside, outside the West?

Robert Kaplan 1:00:38

No, I think Western prestige is in the midst of changing because you have a lot of right of center or right wing populist parties in Europe, that will continue, regardless of the results of this election or that election because of continued migration from the Middle East and Africa, that based on all demographic trends are going to continue for decades. And that's going to fuel the right which will probably become the new establishment in Europe, which will have a different moral compass than the centrist establishment we've been used to. We have an election in the United States, which may change the moral stance of the United States or how it perceives the

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world or how it perceives itself very, very, very differently. Just as a final note, I would say it as I see it, the United States is in decline, but so is China, and so is Russia. And they're not declining at the same pace, or in the same way, but in very different ways. And it's the level of the decline that will say a lot about geopolitics in the coming years.

Anatol Lieven 1:01:53

Indeed, and whether you have the spread of anarchy as opposed to the spread of geopolitical conflict. Robert, thank you so much. That was a fascinating conversation. Thanks to everybody in the audience for coming on. Sorry, I couldn't get to all your questions. And I hope once again that you will be able to join us on March the 14th for a book talk on Simon Shuster's biography of Zenski. So thank you so much, Robert. Thank you once again, and congratulations on on your books and your amazing productivity.

Robert Kaplan 1:02:27

Thank you Anatol, it was a pleasure to be with you