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The Axe Files - Ep. 148: Tony Blinken

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David Axelrod: [00:00:00] Tony Blinken it's it's great to have you. Not just here but at the Institute of Politics where you've been a fellow this spring it's been great to be here David and engaged in great dialogue with these kids here. You know people I've done a lot of these by now and there are all kinds of different stories and there are the sort of Horatio Alger stories. Yours is not that you're not from the wrong side of the tracks. You grew up in New York. I guess your dad was prominent investment banking business. That's right. Your mom in the arts. Yeah. What really interested me was the sort of middle of your childhood and the time you spent in France your mother got remarried. That's right. First of all tell me about your stepfather who seems like a fascinating character.

Tony Blinken: [00:00:58] Well he was and he passed away recently but he was an extraordinary man. He was born in Bialystok Poland and was in a school with 900 kids and he's the only one who has survived because this was just before World War II and he was a Jew in Poland. And so he spent the war in Auschwitz Dachau. My Donek you know the greatest hits of concentration camps and labor camps and it was his only immediate family member to survive but then he went on to build an extraordinary career wound up after the war first in France then in Australia where he had relatives who found him and brought him there made his way to Harvard Law School finished it at the top of his class and had an extraordinary career as an international lawyer but also a writer of some prominence in Europe and in the United States and was one of the earliest proponents of detente between the Soviet Union and the United States wrote a book that was really at the heart of that thesis so he had an extraordinary life. But as you said one of the one of that you know divorce is not usually a good thing and it's disruptive in so many ways. But because my parents handled it so well and because it gave me an opportunity as a result of my mother remarrying to live and spend formative years in France. It gave me a whole new perspective on my own country.

[00:02:29] Anyone who has the opportunity especially at a young age to be able to see their own country through a different set of eyes by living somewhere else. That's an extraordinary benefit.

David Axelrod: [00:02:41] And let me ask you what was your step father's name was Samuel's piece of czar. That's right. What were they doing in France.

Tony Blinken: [00:02:52] So my stepdad was I had a law practice in France. And my mom as you said was very involved in the arts she had been in New York the head of the music program at the Brooklyn Academy of Music way back in the day in the 1960s ran a modern dance company Merce Cunningham who is not just not just any dance company that's a very prominent dance. So it was indeed. And then she went on to run something called the American Center in Paris which brought together some of the most remarkable artists.

Tony Blinken: [00:03:22] Americans brought them to France connected our countries and our cultures in that way. So I was just given a tremendous benefit of this experience living abroad see my country through different eyes. And you know this was the early 1970s. We were still in Vietnam. You'd find yourself even at a very young age in debates in school with your classmates and you were often put in a position of defending your country for good or bad getting into these conversations getting these arguments and it kind of turns you into a junior diplomat.

Tony Blinken: [00:03:56] And I think that's one of the reasons ultimately I became a senior diplomat well eventually through a process of attrition.

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David Axelrod: [00:04:03] When you look at just on your basis of having lived in France and obviously your experience later. Talk just a little bit about what you see in Europe today. Obviously France just had a very very meaningful election in which essentially an independent candidate Emmanuel Macron of no party was elected President Young as president in history and defeated Marine Le Pen who well represents the the right there and the sort of populist right. Yeah but those forces are on the move in or have been in Europe as they are here. What's the state of play in Europe today.

Tony Blinken: [00:04:48] Well I think what we're seeing David on both sides of the Atlantic is very powerful and it really is this new dividing line and it's a dividing line not between left and right Republican Democrat liberal or conservative but a dividing line between those who confronted with these incredible forces of change that we're all dealing with believe that the best answer is to protect themselves to kind of get down into a defensive crouch and toward these forces off. And those who believe that our best bet actually is remaining open remaining connected and trying to shape these forces as best we can to our advantage or at least not to our detriment. So it's the division between those who believe the best answer to change is to build a wall and those who think we should continue build bridges and we're seeing that powerfully on both sides the Atlantic Macron is an interesting element because he was very forceful not just in not running away from remaining open and connected but actually embracing it supporting the Europeans supporting the European Union supporting immigrations to supporting trade Lublin really would have been an extension in France of the Brecht's vote and it would have been connected in people's minds very much so with that vote.

David Axelrod: [00:06:02] It is you know another way of putting this it may be a little as. Flattering to the globalist view is that the debate has emerged between winners and losers in these changes and among professionals around metropolitan areas you saw Le Pen doing very well in the rural areas there just as we saw here so the people who have been caught up in the switches of the economy are the ones who feel detached and are more apt to want to set up barriers.

Tony Blinken: [00:06:37] I think that's exactly right. And for those of us who believe that we need to remain open and connected if we can't find an answer to this problem that is if we can't find ways to make sure that those who feel left out and left behind actually are part of the deal and brought along then the legitimacy of the open connected enterprise is gone it will collapse. And so I think there's a big project again on both sides of the Atlantic not just in defending the infamous liberal international order and everything it represents but also amending it to make sure it's working for more people. Macross challenge now is to do exactly that. If he's going to succeed that's what he has to do.

David Axelrod: [00:07:14] Yeah and he has to do it under difficult circumstances not having a political base among the established parties. Parliamentary elections coming up. He's got his work get his work cut out for him though he seems like a pretty deft politician. Let me I want to follow up on this discussion of your your stepfather's childhood. What kind of discussions did you have with him about his experiences in Auschwitz. And and I mean it's unthinkable though many people experienced it to be a child and lose your family in that way you know for a while.

Tony Blinken: [00:07:53] It's not something he talked about and I think he came to the conclusion that he needed to talk about it that he needed to bear witness that he owed that both to the generation that was lost. But he also did the future. And so he started talk about it at home and then ultimately he started to write about it and he finally wrote an autobiography called a blood and hope that relayed his experiences during the war and everything that came after and tried to tie together what he had seen in a world falling apart in the 1930s and some of the things that he was seeing then in the in the present.

Tony Blinken: [00:08:31] And it's a very powerful powerful book but the stories are beyond anything one can even imagine.

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Tony Blinken: [00:08:37] It's the stuff of movies. But he did talk about it but he he had something that he called a concentration camp humor.

Tony Blinken: [00:08:48] So he would tell he would tell jokes as a way of illuminating some of these things. And that was a way to make it more digestible to a kid.

David Axelrod: [00:08:56] Yeah yeah. It reminds me of I had the privilege of traveling to to Buchenwald with Elie Wiesel a great friend and President Obama and we were in a helicopter approaching bukan well. And I said to Elie I said you know you came here thinking about how you arrived here as a child. Now you're coming back on a helicopter with the president of the United States who happens to be an African-American. I said maybe history has a sense of justice. And he said well I don't know if there's a sense of justice but it certainly is a sense of humor. So but when you are making decisions as a policymaker relative to Syria and I know you you had a dissenting point of view. I mean we both have deep respect for President Obama. We don't need to certify that. But you. You are for a more aggressive stance. Earlier I ask you this in the context of your step father and did it create an even deeper sense of identification with those people who were being murdered displaced tortured by the Assad regime.

Tony Blinken: [00:10:24] David, it did. And look we're we're all the product of our of our own stories and our own families and our backgrounds and that influences a lot of what we become and how we think about these problems and so when it came to to Syria or came to Libya before that. Yeah yeah that certainly influenced me.

David Axelrod: [00:10:41] And but of course you try to advocate for the the.

Tony Blinken: [00:10:45] I was and you know at the time I was and I think my own sense is that President Obama went there against his own better instincts and judgments and maybe he was right because we've seen unfortunately what result in Libya and that is that while we were able to prevent a brutal dictator from massacring his own people we have seen a very chaotic environment emerge afterward and into that environment we see terrorism is state terrorism. So as someone who also went through the experience of the Iraq war working in the Senate and seeing how that played out I'm very sympathetic to the proposition that the president often brought to this which is you know tell you what the next quote next. What's the limiting principle. How does this end. Yes how does this not draw us deeper in or if it doesn't then what's going to result. But Syria I think anyone who is involved no matter what you are advocating has to live with the fact that hundreds of thousands of people were killed. Yeah. Look there's plenty of blame to go around starting with the Syrians themselves going to all of the neighboring countries whether it's the Arab countries whether it's the Russians and the Iranians who have kept fueling the fire.

Tony Blinken: [00:12:01] The Turks and others but as the one country on earth that more than any other has some capacity to mobilize to bring people together to deal with these kinds of atrocities. Sure there are moments that I wish we could have done more but I can't sit here today and say had we done certain things that we didn't do it suddenly it turned out we shouldn't be.

David Axelrod: [00:12:21] You mentioned Iraq and the endless quagmire that some of these some of these wars created. I mean we're still there in some form of it in a form fighting ISIS we're still in Afghanistan. And and yet America since the beginning and certainly in the 20th century was a beacon of hope for people who were being tortured and were being killed who who yearn for freedom and security. And that is part of our value structure. I mean it's one of the things that concerned people when President Trump basically said it's America first now. And the implication was we're not going to do those things. But I think there was an audience for that because people are weary of there's some there are there are challenges and problems here.

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David Axelrod: [00:13:19] People are weary of of America playing the role of I guess they would say policemen around the world. And balancing those things are very tough.

Tony Blinken: [00:13:32] This is a constant constant strain in our in our politics and in our foreign policy and we get pulled between different different polls. Look during the refugee crisis that we've been living through as well you remember there was this image that went around the world of this young Syrian child who had drowned and was being carried onto the beach by Turkish soldier. And you were left. You'd left the White House by that by that point. But I remember I was still there and we were flooded with e-mails telephone calls you name it saying let them all in bring every Syrian here. It's outrageous that we've got the ceiling on on the Syrian refugees. We should let them all in. Three weeks later San Bernardino the terrorist attack and the e-mails the phone calls everything in exactly the opposite direction. No no keep everyone out. These pendulum swings are incredibly intense and we see that playing out every day. Look I think one of the president's great strengths President Obama's great strengths was to not be reactive in the immediate to these huge forces of pressure public opinion to try to see a way through to something that made sense and that held up over time. But that pressure every single day was intense.

David Axelrod: [00:14:57] Yeah. You know I've said this many times sometimes people so what do you talk about your own story so much. And the answer is it's my podcast guys so talking about my own story. But my father was a refugee from Eastern Europe in the early 20th century during the pogroms. And I'm forever grateful to America for providing that haven for him and his family and they became contributors to this the growth of this country. He served in the military and you know and became a productive part of our society and I think this is a strength a great strength of America if we give that up. Not only do we lose our moral position in the world but this is what keeps our country young and vital and competitive.

Tony Blinken: [00:15:56] So I know we get you to the choir on this one not only if you're in the choir I think you put the finger on to me what is one of the biggest challenges we face which is how do we hold on to these values in this time of profound change where there's such a sense of chaos and confusion and vulnerability. But that one in particular remaining open is the one that motivates me more than anything else. And again we're saying a few moments ago that we're we're so influenced by our own stories our own family histories. And like you I have parents grandparents all of whom were immigrants or even refugees and a very very similar story as my father's father fled pogroms and in Russia came to the United States was welcomed into the United States built a great life sent three sons to Ivy League schools. They all contributed and did good things for this country. My stepmother was a refugee from Hungary fleeing the communists literally at the dead of night getting on a train with her mom. Her mom was in a sham marriage to be able to get out of the country. She too welcomed into the United States built a productive life contributed. And then my stepfather who we were talking about earlier as I said the only survivor right of his of his of his town 900 kids in his school the very end of the war after going through all these concentration camps for four years he was on a death march out of one of the camps. He made a run for it. He made it into the Bavarian forest.

Tony Blinken: [00:17:21] He hid out for a couple of days and then he heard this rumbling sound and he looked out from where he was hiding. And instead of seeing the dreaded swastika he saw a 5 pointed white star on a tank. Yes. He ran to the tank. The hatch opened up an African-American guy looked down at him. He got down on his knees. He said the only three words in English that he knew that his mother had taught him. God bless America. The G.I. lifted him into the tank into freedom into the United States. That's the country I know that's the country you know. Yes. And if we lose that we've lost a lot. We've lost everything.

David Axelrod: [00:18:02] I think there's a good spot to take a short break because that that that's a message that I hope will sink in. We're back with Tony Blinken.

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David Axelrod: [00:18:15] I want to return to your story. You went off to Harvard where guys like you go and you you were a writer they're both at the Harvard Crimson crimson I think you did you how did you form your own publication.

Tony Blinken: [00:18:37] I know you were writing about the arts. No I just spent virtually all of my time in school. Yes that was a magazine that the crimson that published the magazine. Yeah.

Tony Blinken: [00:18:47] With Errol Louis who's now a we were coeditors commentator at The New York Daily News a wonderful guy widely widely read and respected. But you and you were sort of trying to decide you had these different strains of your life between the arts between more public pursuits. So you resolved that by doing what a lot of people that you went to law school. That's right.

Tony Blinken: [00:19:17] And why you know I spent time on the school newspaper and loved it and probably learned as much if not more there from the people I was working with than from anything else I did.

Tony Blinken: [00:19:30] Didn't school and then I actually went off to try to be a journalist briefly I was in Washington working at the New Republic magazine and it was actually at an extraordinary time of year is 1984. And of course President Reagan was in office. Democrats were in disarray. And to some extent the New Republic was the place where a lot of the ideas about the future of the party were being written about debated discussed. It was a great time to be there but I kind of felt the need to go back and continue to get a little bit more education so I thought grad school was a good idea. I wasn't really sure if I wanted to stick with with journalism. And as you said so many people do when you're not quite sure what you want to do. But you need another do you think you need another three law schools what's out there. And I did have lawyers in my family my grandfather my stepfather and I and I thought well this is probably the way to do it. And so I did.

David Axelrod: [00:20:21] And you practice law but not very long.

Tony Blinken: [00:20:24] I practiced law for one year 10 months two weeks three days and five hours. Who's counting. It was counting Yeah. Now I was at a big law firm that took place in New York but I concluded that this really wasn't for me and went off.

Tony Blinken: [00:20:37] There was a brief interregnum between law school and starting at this law firm I worked on the Dukakis campaign some which some of you may remember. Yes.

David Axelrod: [00:20:47] It's a footnote in history now. But good man good man Mike Dukakis but not a great campaign.

Tony Blinken: [00:20:54] But you know I had a great experience in that campaign because I worked for a guy who was Dukakis his chief fundraiser a guy named Bob farmer Yeah. Bob was incredibly successful.

David Axelrod: [00:21:02] In fact the campaign the one place where that campaign I think that's one of them is Dukakis got to be the nominee because Bob farmer raised the resources during a very competitive primary season. I said that as someone who was the media consultant for a less fortunate candidate Paul Simon.

Tony Blinken: [00:21:18] And indeed and since I went off to work for Joe Biden later on he said that he reminded me that he was in that race too. But you know Bob Farmall was so successful that the campaign and this tells you a lot about the campaign after the general election ended up with a surplus

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didn't spend the money that was right. It's always painful when you lose. Very painful. But one of the interesting aspects of that David was getting a chance to travel around with with Bob basically across the country and meet people. Now obviously relatively affluent people for the most part in virtually every part of the country and get get a real flavor in ways that I hadn't before for from my own country.

Tony Blinken: [00:22:00] He went to pretty much every every corner. That was a wonderful experience. But then practicing law decided it wasn't for me. Left went back to Europe tried to write in Paris got briefly into very unsuccessfully into the film business started a production company had been interested in that. When I was in New York at law school had great fun for a couple of years but as I said very very unsuccessful. And then Bill Clinton won. And I thought this is really what I want to have a chance to be a part of. So I got in touch with everyone I knew who was involved with with President Clinton including some folks who've done the Dukakis campaign and by a lot of serendipity wound up in the administration at the State Department and about a year into that got pulled over the White House to be one of his speechwriters and dealing on national security.

David Axelrod: [00:22:52] That's right. National security issues. And you stayed there throughout the administration.

Tony Blinken: [00:22:56] I did. I was there basically until we turned out the lights in January 2001.

David Axelrod: [00:23:01] It seems now. Now you had the Balkans and there were some really significant issues during that administration. What lessons did you learn from your experiences during those eight years.

Tony Blinken: [00:23:16] It first of all being as you know being a being a speechwriter in this environment is like being in the most extraordinary graduate school program you can possibly be in because you wind up being involved in just about everything we're doing in this case on foreign policy security. That's what I was writing. So the education there was just unbelievable. Getting to work with the best people in our government across the government on all of these issues trying to understand them trying to figure out ways to communicate them and explain them. And of course writing for Bill Clinton was an interesting an interesting challenge.

David Axelrod: [00:23:54] Yeah he added a word or two to your speeches from time to time.

Tony Blinken: [00:23:58] You know the thing about President Clinton was that he was not really interested in sort of high rhetoric. Now if you're a speechwriter you know you want to be Ted Sorensen you want to be. You want to come up with an incredibly memorable for eight years and you write these things into President Clinton's speeches and he would cross them out and write words words words on the margins.

David Axelrod: [00:24:16] Yeah.

Tony Blinken: [00:24:16] Well his genius was in colloquial Lising and he writes to make the idea he wanted to make the argument he wanted to bring you along.

Tony Blinken: [00:24:25] His For him a successful speech was convincing you something not of leaving you with some memorable phrase but of convincing you something.

David Axelrod: [00:24:33] You know one of the things that happened during those during that administration was the genocide in Rwanda. So I imagine that too was playing on your mind as you looked at Syria.

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Tony Blinken: [00:24:44] We had a look we had we had the genocide in Rwanda and then we we had the Balkans as you said and it's a terrible thing to say we got better at it.

Tony Blinken: [00:24:54] But but but we did.

Tony Blinken: [00:24:56] And ultimately after a lot of travail we got to a much better place in Bosnia. But it took a long time and a lot of suffering in between. But ultimately the United States led in bringing that war to conclusion and Dick Holbrooke played a critical role in that. And then Kosovo which ultimately played out over 78 days to a successful resolution because the United States played a leadership role. But look these things are so hard to compare because at the end of the day some people make the comparison between Syria and the Balkans between Bosnia and Kosovo in the case of Bosnia Kosovo. We were trying to get Slobodan Milosevic to basically give up appendages to his country not to give up power and possibly give up his life which is what we would have been trying to do in Syria with Assad. So was it because he he is has no good options.

David Axelrod: [00:25:51] He is. He's a war criminal. And people will demand that he be treated as such if he ever were to leave.

Tony Blinken: [00:26:00] I suppose that could be negotiated and you'd have to you'd have to negotiate that and I think ultimately you could negotiate that but unless you can convince him that the alternative is even worse it's not going anywhere.

David Axelrod: [00:26:10] Yeah. You worked with these two presidents Obama and Clinton. How were they similar and how are they different. Well one is the high rhetoric thing because Obama was very much an aficionado of words. But what are the ways in which there were the same and what are the ways in which they were different.

Tony Blinken: [00:26:29] Look at the great fortune of my life was to get to work for for both of them because both leaders and people for whom I have extraordinary admiration. Having had the opportunity to see them up close but yes certainly certainly different. Bill Clinton one of the most brilliant minds I've ever been been close to someone with this extraordinary curiosity about everything and an amazing ability to pull different threads and strands together and connect them and make sense and I always thought of in many ways the presidency was the greatest job for Bill Clinton and he was perfectly suited to it because of this curiosity.

David Axelrod: [00:27:14] If you had that kind of insatiable thirst because the stuff that I don't think people fully process what happens in the daily day of a president and you're you're bombarded hour after hour with issues that are really complex on entirely different subjects some of which before you became president you may not have exactly were exposed to. So for someone like Clinton that was like an intellectual picnic.

Tony Blinken: [00:27:42] He he ate it and he ate it up every day and that was that was a wonderful thing and end it and it sort of fed your own curiosity about things. I think at least in my experience President Obama brought to the job some truly remarkable qualities that in my mind at least growing up I thought this is what an American president should be. First of all his own innate decency dignity and integrity. And that was palpable and powerful every day.

Tony Blinken: [00:28:21] But second as you know better than anyone this extraordinarily ordered logical mind that was trying in a non ideological way at least in my judgment to solve the country's problems and to do it with intellectual honesty and rigor and with with a real discipline to it. So I think the Clinton White House arguably was not the most disciplined place I think from my perspective the Obama White House

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was in a very good way but that the single greatest strength that I alluded to this earlier that I thought that President Obama brought to the Enterprise was look the biggest change I experienced in 25 years in government was the flow of information and the daily assault the minute by minute assault of information that 25 years ago simply was not the case in the early days of the Clinton White House. Everyone did basically two things collectively. 6:30 at night we stop what we were doing and we turned on the national network news. ABC CBS NBC and the other thing we kind of did collectively was we get up in the morning wherever we live. Open the front door of our apartment or house pick up a hard copy of The New York Times The Washington Post. Now of course we're on this intravenous feed of information and among other things as you know from having experienced it it puts this relentless pressure on people to just do something to act to do to be responsive to whatever the problem the moment is.

David Axelrod: [00:29:45] It's interesting because people even people who complain about government being too intrusive too large. When something happens they say why isn't the president doing something about it.

Tony Blinken: [00:29:56] And to me I think President Obama saw him saw himself in part as the circuit breaker that is no we're not going to be just reactive to the problem we need. Our job is to step back to think this through. To work this through. And I think nine times out of 10 that's exactly the right thing to do and it takes tremendous discipline and political courage to do that because while you're doing that you're being assaulted every single second you know.

David Axelrod: [00:30:24] I was there obviously during the first two years when the economic crisis was front and center and there was a real desperation to show progress and progress was going to be slow in coming. It's the nature of those kinds of crises. And but we always felt the need to have him out. You know in reflecting on that and I think he feels this way too probably too much so you know and I think over time his instinct which is the one you talk about took hold which is yes I know people want the quick answer and the instant remedy but some things don't yield to that. We're not going to play that game. But it takes a lot of discipline to do that. After the Clinton years you spent time over in Congress I did at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I think that's when I first heard a lot about you. And and you that's where you hooked up with Joe Biden.

Tony Blinken: [00:31:39] That's right. I got a call one day right after the Clinton illust. I wound up at a think tank in Washington and about a year and I got a call one day from Senator Biden. He had just taken over the chairmanship of the Foreign Relations Committee and he was looking for someone to run it a staff director someone said after I took the job hey you've got two words in your title of staff director. Only one of them counts and it's not Director. But that began a truly for me at least wonderful relationship partnership friendship with with Joe Biden. As you know a truly extraordinary person. And we worked on the Foreign Relations Committee grappling with in particular Iraq as well as Afghanistan that dominated the time that we were working there.

David Axelrod: [00:32:32] I want to ask you about Iraq in a second but you talked about Clinton and Obama talk about Biden and he's a unique personality in American politics. Talk about his qualities. The thing that that really hit me working for me.

Tony Blinken: [00:32:49] I had not known him that well before starting to work for him. I'd been in a number of meetings with some of us had gone up to talk to him on a sort of irregular basis. But of course I really got to know him working working for him.

Tony Blinken: [00:33:00] And the thing that struck me most of all is that there was no difference between the public persona and the private person. He what you saw was exactly what you'd get whether it was in public or in private. And that was wonderful. And. There was also this is similar to Bill Clinton I'd say

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someone who fed off the energy of other people just love to be engaged with people. And also this extraordinary beyond extraordinary I can't even think of a word for it. Empathy for other people and someone motivated I think most of all in his understanding of human nature by this one very powerful word that I think remains more important than it's ever been. And that is dignity that ultimately what so much of what we're trying to do in government is about making sure that we protect and defend in various ways people sense of dignity.

[00:34:00] And this extends directly from his own personal. That's right personal life.

Tony Blinken: [00:34:06] And some of the travails of his own family went through very much so there's something else that was wonderful about that period and it's kind of the end of an era. You know the year that I started to work for him was 2002 and that was the year that Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond were retiring from the Senate.

Tony Blinken: [00:34:22] And I started working for him in May and in September shortly before the midterm elections in their retirement he had a retirement party for them which I thought in and of itself was extraordinary because how could these guys who were so different. Biden on the one hand and then Helms and Thurmond on the other. How could they be together in this. And I watched them at this party and I could see the the visible warmth in the relationships and the friendships again despite the most profound differences. And then when Senator Thurmond passed away sometime later he'd asked that Biden deliver the eulogy which was extraordinary. It's worth going back and looking at it.

David Axelrod: [00:34:59] Biden who began his career as an activist for civil rights and this it at Strom the segregationist gun this eulogy is unvarnished.

Tony Blinken: [00:35:09] It actually traces the trajectory of Thurmond's life for for bad and for good. And then Jesse Helms when he opened the Jesse Helms Center at the University of North Carolina he asked that Biden do the inaugural event. Those kinds of relationships across the aisle between people who couldn't be more different in what they believed. That was something very powerful that's something that Biden also stood for.

David Axelrod: [00:35:34] And we don't see very much of that anymore.

Tony Blinken: [00:35:37] And they got and they actually got things done.

David Axelrod: [00:35:40] Yeah.

David Axelrod: [00:35:43] When when you were there the debate over Iraq took place. Biden like many Democrats voted for to authorize that action. I'm sure you guys have talked about it. What how do you look back on that. What what. Are there things that should have been done and I'm not condemning him in any way. No no no because I am a huge admirer of his and he played such an important role in the Obama administration in raising important questions about the application of American force. But do you go back from time to time and say there are big things that we should have thought about that we didn't.

Tony Blinken: [00:36:30] You can't help but go back and think about it and what might we have done differently did we make a profound mistake.

Tony Blinken: [00:36:36] Of course we we did on one level but here was the thinking and maybe it was incredibly naive. Maybe it was an incredible misjudgment or maybe we were complicit in what turned out to be a bad bad mistake. But remember at the time the issue that had been surfaced was the concern that Saddam Hussein had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction of chemical weapons and also

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might be developing a nuclear weapon. And the Bush administration's opening gambit was to say we really need to force this issue now which we agreed with out of the concern that there was something really bad going on. And the way to do that is to get the United Nations inspectors back into Iraq and to be able to finish the job that they started to do and then were stopped from doing. And the argument was we need to show that the United States is united and that we insist that this has to happen and to do that we need a strong vote in Congress showing that Congress is behind us the United States is speaking with one voice. And if we get that we can get the United Nations to insist that the inspectors go back in and then we can get to the bottom of this problem. Well we believe that and Congress ultimately gave the president that support with this authorization to use force not believing that it would be necessary to use it but using it as leverage to show the world we were serious to get the United Nations to take action to get the inspectors back in. And actually that's exactly what happened.

Tony Blinken: [00:38:15] The United Nations voted 15 to nothing that the inspectors had to go back in and they went back in and they started to do their jobs and they were getting the access that they needed. And despite that the Bush administration decided to proceed with the invasion. So you can say it's a little bit like to use a really really bad analogy. It's like the sheriff coming to the town elders saying you know there's a bad guy in the bar. I got to go get him out. I want your authority if I have to to use my gun but I'm going in there to arrest him. And the town others say you know what you've got it. If you have to do it do it. But the goal here is to arrest him and instead the sheriff goes into the barn just start shooting you.

David Axelrod: [00:38:57] You have a unique perspective on this. The big question that arises obviously when we going into pro-tax protracted conflict there is we're way too ambitious. It was the Bush administration too ambitious but we as a country in our assumptions about what we could do relative to the promotion of democratic institutions in a place where there are huge ethnic divisions to this day. And the reason I ask you this is because you ended up as an emissary of the Obama administration negotiating with the various factions in Iraq to try and form a democratic government.

Tony Blinken: [00:39:43] Yeah that's right on one occasion I remember President Obama saying you know don't come back to the you've gotten this straight. So I think we learned two profound lessons well among others to me at least two lessons in Iraq. One is that our military can do anything that we ask it to do. It will get the job done. And that's a great source of strength and confidence for us around the world.

Tony Blinken: [00:40:08] But at the same time usually what it's able to achieve is not sustainable unless there is some kind of political and economic foundation to support it. And unless there is some basic understanding and compact political understanding contact among the people in the country in question to sustain it. And that's what we found out in Iraq. The military did an extraordinary job not only in obviously dealing with Saddam Hussein originally but then over time with great sacrifice and struggle in dealing with the horrific pushback that followed. But absent some kind of political accommodation among the different factions in Iraq you couldn't sustain what the military had gained. And so that's where the emphasis really has to be. That's one big piece of it. The other piece of it is this David. Most of these conflicts differences they're not about us. We need to understand that we need to understand that as powerful as we are and as essential as we are to trying to mobilize collective action to dealing with a crisis or to dealing with a threat to security at the end of the day there are also limits to what we can accomplish and what we can achieve precisely because the problem is usually not about us even though it affects us.

David Axelrod: [00:41:30] We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with Tony Blinken. You you are the national security adviser to Vice President Biden and then you moved over to the National Security Council and then on to become deputy secretary of state during that period was also the Iran negotiation over the nuclear pact you just in a group just formed a new effort to help sustain support for that agreement. You've heard all the arguments for and against make. Make the argument for the Iranian

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agreement and just let me pen something to that. They've got elections coming up this month in it in Iran Rouhani who struck the deal is being pressed. That's right from the right on it as well. And so talk to me about the implications of that election.

Tony Blinken: [00:42:42] I have to say that of all the things I've been involved in in government one of things I'm proudest of is working on the agreement that resulted in Iran largely dismantling and mothballing its nuclear program and pushing far into the future.

Tony Blinken: [00:43:01] The prospect of Iran getting enough material to make to make a nuclear weapon. Here's what we are confronted with at the time.

Tony Blinken: [00:43:10] We had an international sanctions regime that put some put pressure on on Iran and that sanctions regime is one that we actually built. Because when President Obama took office there were significant domestic sanctions but they weren't enough to really do the deal with them around the world.

David Axelrod: [00:43:30] I heard him make the case to the Chinese and the Russians and others about the need for strong sanctions.

Tony Blinken: [00:43:39] But absent that there would never have been sufficient pressure on Iran to actually get it to come back to the table to negotiate because as much pressure as we were putting on them given the kind of activity they had around the world with all of these different economies and let's get them to crackdown it wasn't going to be enough. And that's exactly what President Obama did and that was diplomacy diplomacy and action. And it was successful and it got to the point where Iran was at the table. But here was the bargain these other countries said the purpose of exerting this pressure on Iran that will take part in is not to get them to bring them to their knees to change the regime to deal with all of the other problems including their sponsorship of sponsors terrorism destabilizing activists. It's to deal with the nuclear problem and you'll have our support as long as that's the objective. And we got around to the table on that basis and then through extraordinary effort and negotiations led by John Kerry we were able to get an agreement that manifestly has made us more secure and made every country in the region more secure.

Tony Blinken: [00:44:47] And while some countries in the region publicly disputed the deal and the benefits that it brought in private a lot of them including the Israelis actually pointed to its benefits to their security but had we not done that a couple of things could have happened because Iran while we were putting this pressure on was continuing to move forward getting closer and closer to the day when it could produce enough fissile material for nuclear weapons that it could turn around in a matter of weeks giving us very little time to react. So we need to deal with this and the military options were not were not good. Given the likely unintended consequences of using military action against Iran and the pressure option was only viable if we could keep other countries onboard with us.

David Axelrod: [00:45:44] And it was clear that they were not going to do that in perpetuity.

Tony Blinken: [00:45:48] They were they would not do it today and it was starting to fray. So we needed to try and bring this to a head and we needed to do it in a way that brought these other countries along and kept them with us. And that's exactly what we did. So the bottom line is look it's certainly possible that when some of the constraints in this deal begin to go away 10 years out 15 years out 20 years out Iran could decide to turn around and start to move back to a place where it's developing fissile material for a weapon. But we will have gained at least 10 15 20 years we will have gained far greater insight through the most intrusive inspections in modern regime ever devised of what they have where they have it. Who's involved in it and will retain every option that we had when we struck the deal to do something

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about it if we have to into the future.

David Axelrod: [00:46:39] So what's at stake in this election. Because the the hardliners in Iran were as unhappy with the agreement as hardliners in the US.

Tony Blinken: [00:46:49] Yeah and that's what's one of the most interesting aspects of this look.

Tony Blinken: [00:46:53] We were very clear that as Freud would say a cigar is just a cigar sometimes. In this case a nuclear deal is just that a nuclear deal.

Tony Blinken: [00:47:01] Now some people talked about other impacts that it might have in terms of opening up Iran and the larger relationship. But what motivated us was dealing with a very specific problem a very specific threat to our security and the security of the international community and that was Iran racing toward the capacity to have material for a nuclear bomb.

Tony Blinken: [00:47:22] But interestingly enough in Iran itself. That's not how the hardliners see the deal. They see it as a Trojan horse designed very much to open Iran up to Western influence to undermine the very foundations of the revolution. It's pretty interesting. They see it that way. And what's at stake in part in this election is if Rouhani who by the way is is no angel right but he's pragmatic and he understands that it's in Iran's interest to be more open to the world to be more connected. And so he's trying to shape its policies in a more pragmatic way. If he loses and the hardliners come in they may well try to renege on the deal.

Tony Blinken: [00:48:03] Now it's interesting because I think the Trump administration certainly expressed interest in figuring out ways out of the deal. Hardliners in Iran also want out but neither wants to be blamed for it. So each is in effect trying to provoke the other into taking a step that will crater the deal. It's profoundly in our interest that that not happen. And diplomacy works with stood up to make sure that we're defending what was really one of the signal achievements of the administration for our country security.

Tony Blinken: [00:48:36] But you know David it goes to something larger.

Tony Blinken: [00:48:40] The the the name of this group diplomacy works. It's specific to Iran but it's also specific to something that I think was a hallmark of the Obama administration which was an emphasis on diplomacy. And when you look at the record it was American diplomacy that got this agreement with Iran. It wouldn't have happened without it. It was American diplomacy that rally countries around the world to deal with the Ebola outbreak. It was American diplomacy that led to the agreement in Paris on climate. It was American diplomacy that brought 65 countries together to deal with the Islamic State. It was American diplomacy also that changed our relationship or at least began to change the relationship with Cuba and also with Vietnam to countries that have been a thorn in the side of our foreign policy for decades. So I think we've demonstrated the power of American diplomacy when it's at the forefront of what you're trying to do. And I hope we don't lose that either.

David Axelrod: [00:49:45] Yeah. Well because there is this proposal a budget proposal at least preliminarily that would see deep cuts in in the State Department and diploma's.

Tony Blinken: [00:49:55] Yeah that's right. And interestingly I think the among the strongest proponents for maintaining the State Department's budget is our military uniform and civilian. And you've heard General Mattis speak very eloquently about the need to sustain support for the State Department as he put it. If you cut State Department budgets you better give me more money because I'm going to need more bullets because there'll be more conflict.

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David Axelrod: [00:50:17] I have to ask you one country with which we don't have better relations today is Russia and I'm interested in your observation you ran the process at the National Security Council in your role as deputy director there and process was very important. What was your reaction the other day when you read the story and we still don't know exactly what happened. But the intimation that the president shared intelligence with the foreign minister ambassador from Russia that may have compromised another country's assets in the field in this fight against the Islamic State.

Tony Blinken: [00:51:05] Well two reactions. One reaction was specific to this problem of having shared this intelligence that was highly sensitive and was provided to us apparently by a third country specifically Israel.

Tony Blinken: [00:51:19] So it's been reported specifically with the requirement that it not not be shared in fact not only not shared with other countries but not even shared with an urgent.

David Axelrod: [00:51:28] MacMaster than this national security director said the president wasn't aware of the sources and methods involved and wasn't fully briefed on you know where the information came from.

Tony Blinken: [00:51:41] I'm perfectly willing to accept that that's that that's true. But he should have been. And it's it's one thing to say look you know he didn't know he couldn't know this is not his background this is not where he comes from. But unfortunately it is now his number one responsibility to know better. As president the United States so I understand it. If that's if that's what happened. But that's also not acceptable we can't afford that. And now what happens is this you know when we have other countries providing absolutely vital intelligence to us for our own security and for their security but who are very very concerned about the sources and methods getting out that is how this country got the intelligence and making sure that others don't know that because they could then stop it or interrupt it and put lives in danger. You know I will say to that country look if you give us this information we're going to keep it very very very tightly compartmentalized. We're only going to the only person we're going to share with is the president of the United States. That used to be...

[00:52:43] [Crosstalk]

David Axelrod: [00:52:44] You know I heard early in the administration from a former minister in in Europe that their intelligence services were nervous because of the perceived relationship with Russia that the that they didn't want to necessarily share highly sensitive intelligence.

Tony Blinken: [00:53:05] Yeah but this goes back to to me what the larger problem is here and that's this step back to the election. And what was Russia trying to achieve in interfering in our election.

Tony Blinken: [00:53:15] It was trying to see what it's been trying to do throughout the West in recent years and that is to undermine the legitimacy and credibility of our institutions and leaders to sow doubt in our system to create disunity that way. And also at the same time to have Putin be able to demonstrate to his own people you know every system is corrupt every system is failing. Ours is no worse. Stick with me. And he has now succeeded beyond his wildest imagination in doing just that in the United States not just in Western Europe. Even more so in the United States. He managed to sow doubt about our electoral system. He managed to help defeat the candidate that he despised Hillary Clinton. He managed to get the first National Security Adviser adviser fired. He managed to instigate instigate multiple counterintelligence investigations and now he's managed in effect to cause the president to fire the FBI director who is investigating him because of concerns about collusion with Russia. And every step along the way either knowingly or not wittingly or not President Trump has aided and abetted this effort at de-

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legitimizing our institutions and our leaders. When he was talking about how the election was going to be rigged before the election in November those were exactly the talking points of Russia today and Sputnik the propaganda arms of the Russian government when he talked about massive electoral fraud after the election. Those were the same talking points the Russians had been putting out. All of that advanced exactly what Putin was trying to achieve. Doubt about our system and its legitimacy.

Tony Blinken: [00:54:48] Now by his actions again wittingly or not he's undermined the investigations into [crosstalk]

David Axelrod: [00:54:54] You were critical of the firing of Jim Comey obviously you were with the intelligence community when you were at the State Department. What was your thought yesterday or the other day when the story broke about the conversation between Comey and the president in which Comey alleges at least to his files apparently that the president's you know why don't we drop this matter with Flynn.

Tony Blinken: [00:55:26] Well my first thought David was that these are chickens coming home to roost because remember just a few days before that the president had unleashed this veiled threat in his direction saying he better hope they're not haters of our meeting when. When Comey said that the president asked for a loyalty oath. Ironically it turns out the president should have been the one hoping there's no memo of the meeting. Because if that memo in fact exists and I have every reason to believe that it does and if it accurately reflects what it's reported to say which is that the president tried to get him to lay off the investigation and prosecution of Mike Flynn It's obviously a real problem Look here too. Let's for a second give the president the benefit of the doubt. Let's say that really what was motivating him was look he just had to fire this guy Mike Flynn.

Tony Blinken: [00:56:18] He's suffered enough. Trying to help a friend which is a human instinct but totally totally inappropriate for the president the United States to be having that conversation with the drone when he dismissed other people from the room so he could have it. And that's certainly it obviously adds to this suspicion as does the firing of Mr. Parmalee. But even so this gets back to this point that it's not good enough to say look he just didn't know any better. He's the press in the United States we have to have a president who knows better.

David Axelrod: [00:56:49] What does this do. He's now leaving on a foreign trip as we speak. What does this do to his ability to do America's business in the world.

Tony Blinken: [00:56:58] It puts a dead weight around it. Look we've all experienced this when when there's when a president goes abroad having a problem at home. On the one hand he helps. This is a great opportunity to change the subject. Often though that doesn't work because the press corps that comes along with him is usually asking me about the problem back home. This is that on steroids. This is a dead weight around the trip and it's an incredibly important one two incredibly important partners allies who are in some cases less than that but countries that have a real impact on our security and prosperity going forward. So it's going to be a very big challenge to actually focus on the issues at hand.

Tony Blinken: [00:57:40] And you're going to have a White House staff with you that is all at once trying to play defense against what's coming from back home while also trying to do what's necessary to have a successful trip. That's an almost impossible hurdle.

David Axelrod: [00:57:54] Just a couple more things before we go. You know Dan Shapiro is on who you you know well former colleague of yours from National Security Council ambassador the former ambassador to Israel. He said that he was surprised at what the Trump administration is doing in the Middle East and trying to promote the peace process because he said the president's emissaries actually

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visiting all the right people saying all the right things. Delivering a message to the Israelis that settlements should not proceed as they have been proceeding. Have you been surprised by that.

Tony Blinken: [00:58:31] I've I've heard the same reports and I think in particular the person that President Trump's designated to be the point person on this Jeff Greenfield has by all accounts has been doing a terrific job and is exactly as you say has been talking everyone more important I've been listening to everyone and seems to be bringing a very open mind to this and that's very encouraging.

David Axelrod: [00:58:51] Probably the knottiest problem there is in diplomacy you see Trump being in a position to actually deliver something that the Obama administration the Bush administration the Clinton administration couldn't in terms of promoting in a peace process that to its to its successful end.

Tony Blinken: [00:59:13] Look honestly I'd like to I'd like to think so simply because it would be so profoundly in the interest of everyone involved including the United States. But look we can't minimize how extraordinarily difficult this is going to be at this particular moment. The politics in both Israel and the Palestinian Authority don't auger well for moving things forward. There is also this outside in approach of trying to get the Arabs to play a leading role in moving the process forward.

Tony Blinken: [00:59:42] Not exactly a new idea something that we worked on very hard.

David Axelrod: [00:59:45] The president made the same stop in Saudi Arabia in the beginning of his administration to try and promote not Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is as well but Egypt and trying to promote consensus in the region among Arabs to push for.

Tony Blinken: [01:00:00] That's right. And look there and there may be a play there but I think at best incremental steps on all sides are probably what's needed to try to get back to some basic modicum of trust. But here's the thing at the end of the day the status quo isn't static and Israel is now at the point or very very close to the point where the dream of a Jewish and democratic state is gone.

David Axelrod: [01:00:28] And this generation because you can occupy all those you can argue with Palestinians and that's right.

Tony Blinken: [01:00:34] And then you and either you or you have a choice either you're going to be democratic that is allow them all of their rights in which case the state will no longer be Jewish or you're not going to be democratic because you're going to have to deny them their rights in order to retain its Jewish character. I don't think anyone wants to be you know we talk about oh are we closing the door on a two state solution. I would put this differently I would say are we closing the door on a Jewish democratic Israel.

Tony Blinken: [01:01:00] That's what's at stake.

David Axelrod: [01:01:03] Well what about you.

David Axelrod: [01:01:04] What are you. I know you're working with Vice President Biden on a new institute. That's right. University of Pennsylvania. What do you see in your future.

Tony Blinken: [01:01:15] Well we're working very hard with with Vice President Biden on exactly that something called the pen Biden center for diplomacy and global engagement. And we brought some very good people together at the University of Pennsylvania is very very focused on this project. But it is in large part designed to do what we were talking about a little bit earlier which was to look at the challenges now to the liberal order that the United States helped to build and shape over the last seven years to think

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about how we do a better job defending it but also to focus on on how we amend it. So that's something I'm very excited about because it's so necessary. I also have the privilege of being an enemy of the people going to work for something you're familiar with CNN but also for the New York Times writing for them on a monthly basis. And I have to say at this moment in our history journalism's never been more important I agree that it is and the work that publications like The Times and CNN are doing has never been more vital.

David Axelrod: [01:02:21] Tony Blinken, I could talk to you forever man you're you're not only a bright insightful guy but a committed American and a committed person and I honor your service and I'm very grateful for the time you've spent at the Institute.

Tony Blinken: [01:02:40] Right back at you.