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THE AXE FILES

The Axe Files - Ep. 188: Susan Rice

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Axelrod: [00:00:00] Susan Rice it's great to be with you as always good to see you again.

Rice: [00:00:05] It's great to be with you, Axe.

Axelrod: [00:00:06] And thank you for being at the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago. We so appreciate that as well. You know you have a very distinguished career in public service. But I want to start by talking to you about your parents because their story- both of their stories is quite remarkable. So tell me about their journey because it seems to me that it's very much one that informs your role.

Rice: [00:00:40] Well they came from very different backgrounds. My mother was born in Portland Maine in 1933. And she was the daughter of immigrants from Jamaica who had found their way to Portland around 1911 1912. And neither of my grandparents on my mother's side had any formal education beyond say eighth or ninth grade. My grandfather was a janitor a porter in a music store a cobbler. My grandmother was a seamstress and a maid. But they came to the United States with a deeply instilled commitment to educating their kids. That was their whole mission.

Axelrod: [00:01:26] From where did that come?

Rice: [00:01:30] Well it's interesting. You know it's hard on in some ways it's hard for me to answer because it was so evident and obvious from day one. I think it partly came from the fact that back in Jamaica they came from families that were religious and serious about upward mobility. And for the for them coming to the United States was an opportunity to you know fulfill very much the American immigrant dream. And for them that meant making sure that their kids had every opportunity to get the best education because without that they understood that there was very little hope of upward mobility. And my grandmother's story was particularly interesting because she actually came from a relatively wealthy family in Jamaica and her father was Irish and had money. And died early. And he had a greedy brother who took over the resources of the family and sent my grandmother off to live with distant relatives as you know made to them in poverty. So she had this sort of sense of you know entitlement but loss that in many ways she was trying to recoup through her children. So they came to Maine and they had five kids. My mother was the youngest of five the other four were boys. And my grandparents saved their money and managed it wisely took out you know loans from the bank after having established a decent credit record made their kids work and sent all five of their kids to college with through a combination of their own resources and scholarship resources. My four uncles went to Bowdoin College.

Axelrod: [00:03:26] In Maine.

Rice: [00:03:27] In Maine.

Axelrod: [00:03:28] Yes.

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Rice: [00:03:29] And I I think this is the the the family lore that my grandfather was the first man to have four sons graduate from Bowdoin. And in any event he was named an honorary member of what would have been his graduating class of 1912. And you know he got to know about Bowdoin because to make money on the side when he wasn't working in the music store he was bartending at parties on the weekends where he could you know get an opportunity and Bowdoin became one of the places that he served. So he looked at this place and said This is where I want my sons to go. And they were all excellent students but my mom the youngest couldn't go to Bowdoin because back then it was an all girl all boys school and my grandparents really didn't know what to do with her. And they finally.

Axelrod: [00:04:20] They sent her to to some lesser institution.

Rice: [00:04:22] Yes they sent her to a lesser institution called Radcliffe College at Harvard University.

Axelrod: [00:04:29] Yes.

Rice: [00:04:29] And so my mom graduated from from Radcliffe and she was 11 years younger than her youngest brother. So she was sort of an unexpected addition to the family.

Axelrod: [00:04:44] As it happens.

Rice: [00:04:44] Exactly. And my grandmother was 44 years old when my mother was born which in that era was actually dangerous to.

Axelrod: [00:04:52] Yes.

Rice: [00:04:53] To give birth at that age. So you know there was always a lot of anxiety about you know would my grandmother make it through pregnancy would my mother have any disability in the event. Thankfully everything turned out OK and my mom was in the tradition of her brother's star she was valedictorian of her high school class at Portland High School. She was head of the student government. She was you know active in production of the yearbook and the newspaper so she was a standout and then continued to excel at Harvard. My dad's side of the family was from South Carolina and he grew up in a family that. He was born in 1919 in Florence, South Carolina but lived as a child in Sumpter, South Carolina where his father and my grandfather was an A.M.E. minister and was the pastor ultimately at Mount Pisgah A.M.E. in Sumpter which was a large parish and my grandfather was a prominent member of that community. He had gone to college and his father my great grandfather who had been born a slave in South Carolina in 1845 and then served in the Union Army also went to college and got his divinity degree and then actually started a school in New in New Jersey called the Bordentown School which lasted almost 70 years. So on my father's side there was a history of college education and for African-Americans to have generations going back to those that were slaves.

Axelrod: [00:06:39] In South Carolina.

Rice: [00:06:40] Yes. To be college educated was rather unusual but my father's father died when my dad was seven and that sort of upset all of the economic stability that the family had.

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They had to move out of the parish house. My grandmother who had gotten sort of community college level degree went back to college to get her her B.A. and she became a teacher and worked through the rest of my father's childhood. He too was the youngest child with some pretty big gap between him and his older siblings. But he had to move to New York City as a teenager because his mother felt that he couldn't get a quality education in South Carolina in the depths of the worst of segregation. And so on both sides of my family this deeply instilled commitment to education as the means of mobility and as the sine qua non for any future value was very much imbued in both my parents and they brought that to raising me and my brother. My dad got his B.A. and MBA from City College of New York and then he served.

Axelrod: [00:08:04] Which was actually a great institution.

Rice: [00:08:07] It was. And is.

Axelrod: [00:08:07] And is. But you know I grew up in New York so many people came through. City College was the way was the path.

Rice: [00:08:18] Path for immigrants path for low income upwardly mobile people and as he described it back then nobody lived at City College it was a commuter college and you know it was really one of the only one of the few affordable options. So after city college he got drafted into the Air Force in World War II and served at Tuskegee for several years with the Tuskegee airmen. And then after that after the war

Axelrod: [00:08:46] let me just stop here because that's a you know that talk about history. The Tuskegee Airmen. Did he talk about that experience a lot? And what what what did he learn from that experience?

Rice: [00:09:02] Well it was fascinating. He did talk about it quite a bit. He was sort of a financial analyst systems analyst logistician. They took advantage of the fact that he had an MBA and B.A. in economics. And they sent him to Harvard Business School for a year and trained him in an early stage program that the Air Force pioneered with it for a new kind of systems analysis and logistics so he was not a pilot but he was a captain down at the base in Tuskegee and he had to learn to fly on the side. But he was you know.

Axelrod: [00:09:45] An operations guy.

Rice: [00:09:46] An operations guy and an administrative guy. And it was fascinating because the cadre of African-American men who served in that time in Tuskegee I think were somewhat self selected by were selected by the military too because of their background and their skills. They were forming of course the first black fighter unit and the remarkable thing is so many of the people that my father came to know and made friends with at Tuskegee that cadre went on to become some of the most successful African-Americans in their generation pioneers in law and medicine and academia. And I've often wanted to and haven't yet had time to write a book about the history sort of a social history of Tuskegee. What was it about the people there and how they interacted with one another that enabled them to go on to be such a remarkable cadre of of leaders?

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Axelrod: [00:10:56] What's also interesting is that even in the context of a segregated military there was this recognition that someone like your father had these skills so within that unit they capitalized sending him to Harvard and so on capitalized on that.

Rice: [00:11:13] It did but you know actually interestingly my father met two of my mother's brothers just long before he met my mother down at Tuskegee. They were there too. But the thing that he spoke most about was the pain and the resentment that he felt fighting or serving in a segregated military that was fighting a war that was about freedom freedom for everybody except African-Americans. And you know my dad's whole professional life and personal life was deeply colored by the rigidity and the oppression of Southern segregation as he experienced in South Carolina and then frankly its manifestation which was different but very real in New York City in the late thirties and early 40s. And then to serve in the war in a unit where yes they were the first to be given the opportunity to fly. But the whole theory of the case was that they were different and inferior to their white counterparts. And so my dad who was a patriot and deeply loved this country and served it later in his career at the very highest levels never never got over the bitterness he felt about segregation in the context of serving in WWII.

Axelrod: [00:12:42] You know the irony the bitter irony of it as you say is clear and you put it well I mean to fight a war for freedom but to be denied equality is I mean which is why the Tuskegee Airmen who fought so valiantly are a symbol of a of a period in our history that was dark. I mean and and shameful. So he but he emerged he had the G.I. Bill.

Rice: [00:13:18] Yeah. And he went to Berkeley University of California at Berkeley to get his Ph.D. in economics. And he was one of the very few African-Americans of his generation to study economics at the Ph.D. level. He also went to India for a year on a Fulbright Scholarship which supported his dissertation research. And when he finished at Berkeley which he described often with extraordinary affection is the most fun years of his life.

Axelrod: [00:13:48] He also but didn't he work as a firefighter while he was at Berkley?

Rice: [00:13:50] Yes. You guys have done some homework here.

Axelrod: [00:13:50] Yeah thats our thing here.

Rice: [00:13:50] So he yes he was the first African-American in the Berkeley fire department. And he describes having from childhood wanting to be a fireman and he found his dream fulfilled. And then he got into his first few fires and he realized he hadn't been trained he didn't know what he was doing. So the fire chief again sort of saw his talents and said let me make this guy the dispatcher and he can do his homework for his Ph.D. while he's you know on the job and he can do the dispatch when necessary. My dad used to tell a story of the day and I can't remember exactly what year it was in the early 50s when the Berkeley cyclotron this is the you know the nuclear facility was threatened by fire in the Berkeley hills. And it came very very close to burning down the cyclotron. He was the dispatcher on duty the night that this happened and he liked to joke that he was responsible for saving the site which he got the folks there in a timely way when they were most needed.

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Axelrod: [00:15:06] I used to I started my life working nights at the Chicago Tribune so I covered many many fires saw a lot of heroism and I'm sure a lot of guys who said they saved they saved things that otherwise wouldn't be here.

Rice: [00:15:21] I think the credit goes to the guys who were fighting the fire most importantly. But its a team effort.

Axelrod: [00:15:25] Hey someone's gotta tell them where to go. Let's not forget the dispatchers.

Axelrod: [00:15:30] So and then he became an economist of real note. Wanna help? He went to Nigeria?

Rice: [00:15:38] Yes. So after you graduate school he went to Cornell and he was an assistant professor of economics at Cornell. Again I think in that era still held back by being African-American. He couldn't go into government right away. They weren't hiring in his field. He couldn't go into the private sector. So he was sort of confined to academia and Cornell.

Axelrod: [00:16:03] Couldn't go into the private sector because he wouldn't get hired?

Rice: [00:16:06] Right. They weren't they were not hiring African-Americans at the skill level that his qualifications would merit. And so Cornell hired him not realizing he was African-American sight unseen on the recommendation of one of his professors at Berkeley. But he got there and they you know they decided to tolerate it and he enjoyed his time for about six years at Cornell and then he had the opportunity to work at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York on loan for a couple of years as a staff economist and then from there and that's about the time by the way he met my mother in New York City.

Axelrod: [00:16:54] What was she doing?

Rice: [00:16:54] She after graduating from Radcliffe at Harvard had gotten deeply involved in trying to broaden education opportunities for low income and minority students. So she worked at a small nonprofit called NisFinnis [?] which helped negro as they called them back then students from basically black high schools to have the support and the counseling and indeed some financial support to begin to integrate and attend white colleges. And so that was her first. NisFinnis. Its an acronym

Axelrod: [00:17:31] We need some acronym help there.

Rice: [00:17:31] And I can I can I always screw up the name is a National Negro Scholarship and Support Fund something like that.

Axelrod: [00:17:43] I have it I probably have it here somewhere in my notes.

Rice: [00:17:45] Its something like that but it doesn't exist anymore. But it was a sort of pioneering organization of its time. So she did that for four or five years and then she began to work for the college board which she stayed at for over 30 years in different incarnations. But she was at the College Board in New York which is as many people know the organization that administers the the SAT and the AP exams.

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Axelrod: [00:18:12] I have a beef to pick with them but we'll go over that later.

Rice: [00:18:13] We can do that later. But her work there her great distinction in her 30 years at the College Board was being instrumental in the creation and the perpetuation of the Pell Grant program.

Axelrod: [00:18:25] Yes.

Rice: [00:18:27] And you know I was just at a event.

Axelrod: [00:18:30] For low federal scholarships for low income students which were.

Rice: [00:18:35] Right which persists and over 70 million Americans have been recipients of Pell Grants so talk about impact. I was just at a thing.

Axelrod: [00:18:44] It expanded during the Obama administration.

Rice: [00:18:46] Yes David. It's good. Thank you to the President to Arnie to John King. Its very important. And these grants were were the difference between going to college and not going to college for so many folks. And she was dubbed in her latter life the mother of Pell Grants so that was her thing. Isn't that cool?

Axelrod: [00:19:09] That's quite a legacy. Yeah.

Rice: [00:19:13] So they met in New York. And then they married in something like 1962. And my they went almost immediately to Nigeria where my dad was hired by USAID the Agency for International Development to help establish the brand new central bank of Nigeria soon after their independence and so they live for a couple of years in Nigeria. And that is actually where I was conceived. And then they came back to the US shortly before I was born and I was born in Washington in November of 64.

Axelrod: [00:19:47] We're just going to take a short break and we'll be right back with Susan Rice.

Axelrod: [00:19:56] And your dad we should just finish up that discussion because I do want to talk about you. Your dad was

Rice: [00:20:03] My dad was ultimately a governor of the Federal Reserve from 1979 to 1986 appointed by President Carter.

Axelrod: [00:20:12] Was that a pathbreaking appointment? Had there have been other African-American governors?

Rice: [00:20:17] He was the second African-American governor of the Federal Reserve. The first was Dr. Andrew Brimmer who's career path and my dad's were highly similar throughout their work you know they knew each other well and I grew up with his daughter Esther Brimmer. So there's a real parallelism there. But Brimmer was the first and my dad was the second.

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Axelrod: [00:20:41] So you grew up in Washington. I in reviewing that history came to deeply resent you because you were a three sport star you were the valedictorian you were the president of your class. Like what's up with that?

Rice: [00:21:02] I was just trying to keep up with my mother. So no I I was very fortunate. I I my parents like their parents put a great premium on trying to give me and my brother the best possible education. They didn't have a lot of money but they made a solid living and they were able to finance my private school education and that of my younger brother basically from nursery school through graduation and I attended the Beauvoir school and then the National Cathedral School for Girls.

Axelrod: [00:21:41] And among those students there were Madeleine Albright's kids.

Rice: [00:21:44] Madeleine Albright's kids. Kennedy's kids. Mondale kids. By the way not just Democrats I mean it was I grew up in a bipartisan community of the children of our most senior officials.

Axelrod: [00:22:04] The reason to raise obviously Albrights kids is because she became a lifelong mentor.

Rice: [00:22:11] Yes. And before she was my mentor she was my mom's friend and they served together on the board of the elementary school I mentioned the Beauvoir school which is how they became close and her Madeleine Albright's ex-husband and my dad played tennis every Sunday together in a foursome. And I went to school with the Albright girls. Katie is younger than me. Allison and Anne are a little bit older than me. But our families would often gather for Sunday lunch after the tennis matches at Hamburger Hamlet. I don't know do you remember Hamburger Hamlet?

Axelrod: [00:22:46] I do.

Rice: [00:22:46] The best thing about Hamburger Hamlet was that they had these foot long hot dogs and great milkshakes. And so that's one of my childhood memories is those family lunches.

Axelrod: [00:22:58] And you went off to Stanford.

Rice: [00:22:59] I did.

Axelrod: [00:23:00] You resisted your parents alma maters.

Rice: [00:23:05] This was a lot of drama. My mother really really really didn't want me to go to Stanford. She wanted me to stay on the east coast go to Yale go to Harvard preferably from her point of view and she thought Stanford was too far away and not as good as her her alma mater. My dad was totally cool because he'd gone to Berkeley and loved it and he got the the appeal of going to the west coast.

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Rice: [00:23:30] Did you want to get away? Did you want a little distance between you and your folks? They sound like powerful personalities.

Rice: [00:23:36] Well they were they were powerful personalities. They were also divorced by the time I went to college they got divorced. Actually they separated when I was 10 and it was a pretty bitter and unpleasant lead up to the divorce and the divorce itself.

Axelrod: [00:23:57] Do you have siblings?

Rice: [00:23:58] I do. I have a younger brother John who's not quite two years younger than me who I'm very very close to but I don't think I was trying to get away at least it wasn't that wasn't a conscious consideration. But as I you know as I get older and think it through I think it wasn't so much that I was trying to get far away from them but I wanted my own experience and I felt like I had been steeped in this rarefied East Coast elite experience and that Harvard or Yale which were my options would have been more of the same.

Axelrod: [00:24:36] So you opted for a West Coast experience.

Rice: [00:24:38] Yes exactly.

Axelrod: [00:24:41] And when you one of the things I thought was noteworthy about your tenure there was you were an early activist in this whole divestiture movement.

Rice: [00:24:54] The anti-apartheid divestiture movement. Yes. So first of all just to sing Stanford's praises for a second. I love Stanford.

Axelrod: [00:25:06] We will insert the school song at this point.

Rice: [00:25:07] I still love Stanford and had a great time there. And you know I found it stimulating from an academic point of view. It's where I met Ian now my husband and made great friends and traveled overseas and all that stuff. But in my last couple of years I got quite drawn to the anti-apartheid struggle which was in some ways the modern day in that context we're talking about the mid 80s now the modern day civil rights movement. And Archbishop Tutu had come to Stanford to speak and he was extraordinarily compelling and powerful. And I got engaged in the apartheid campus movement which at that stage really was as you said about divestment trying to get the university to stop investing in companies that were doing business in apartheid South Africa. And then my senior year. I and two of my classmates were awarded Rhodes scholarships to go after graduation to Oxford to study there. And they my colleagues who received the scholarships one is Mike McFaul who is a professor now at Stanford our former ambassador to Russia. And the other was a guy named Bill Hanley who is an English professor. But in any event the three of us were sort of shared an interest in the anti-apartheid struggle and also were cognizant of the irony of accepting Cecil Rhodes' money which had all been stolen from black South Africans and Zimbabweans to go to Oxford you know while having some sense of outrage about what was happening in the current apartheid South Africa so we got involved and put together a little way to pressure the university by the end of our senior years.

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Axelrod: [00:27:08] And I read somewhere that that was noted by the President of the University Donald Kennedy when you went up to receive your degree.

Rice: [00:27:19] Yeah. So what we did just to put it a little bit in context. We we established something called the Free South Africa Fund which was a way for Stanford alumni to contribute to Stanford without contributing to their investments in apartheid South Africa. So it was an alternative endowment fund. People could put their money there. And if Stanford divested they'd receive all the money in the fund. Or if apartheid ended within 10 years they'd receive the money in the fund. But if neither had happened within 10 years the money would go to black South Africans and for their educational purposes. And Donald Kennedy then the president of Stanford I think was concerned that this could gain real traction and that a lot of alumni would stop giving to the university and start giving to this fund in the event it proved to be more powerful symbolically than it was practically but it gave me a little bit of

Axelrod: [00:28:25] Notoriety.

Rice: [00:28:26] pleasure. No I was

Axelrod: [00:28:26] Well with him certainly

Rice: [00:28:29] It gave me pleasure that it pissed him off enough and he thought it was a credible enough threat to to give me a hard time at my graduation in front of my parents.

Axelrod: [00:28:41] What'd they think about it?

Rice: [00:28:42] They were for it. They thought it was you know the right thing to do.

Axelrod: [00:28:46] I don't want to run through your entire educational career. But let's just stipulate that you followed down the path of the family path became a scholar. You got involved in advising public officials I guess Dukakis was the first campaign.

Rice: [00:29:07] I was on the Dukakis campaign as a junior foreign policy person.

Axelrod: [00:29:11] And then you got involved with the Clinton campaign and the Clinton

Rice: [00:29:16] No actually this is I didn't do the Clinton campaign. I did Dukakis in 1988 and then I was working for McKinsey and Company in Toronto and elsewhere during the Clinton campaign. But when President Clinton was elected a number of the folks who had worked on the Clinton campaign were the same people that had worked with me on the Dukakis campaign. And they found me up in Toronto and asked me to come down and interview for a couple of jobs at the White House one on the National Security Council staff and the other on the National Economic Council staff.

Axelrod: [00:29:51] And what appealed to you about that?

Rice: [00:29:53] Well I had always wanted to be involved in policymaking I mean that was part of the part of my passion and my experience growing up in Washington in these communities. When I was in high school I worked on Capitol Hill. I always knew that I wanted to get into

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government in some form or fashion. And when I was younger I actually thought I might want to run for elected office. And then I decided otherwise but I still wanted to be a policymaker and what I didn't know is whether I wanted domestic policy or foreign policy. That was more the dilemma. But I it wasn't a hard choice for me to take the opportunity to come and work in the White House. I was only 28 years old at the time and the jobs that I was offered were were both really interesting and exciting. And so at that point I had to choose Economic Council Security Council.

Axelrod: [00:30:47] That's a high class problem.

Rice: [00:30:49] I chose National Security Council. That was a high class problem but it was a sort of decisive moment.

Axelrod: [00:30:52] One of the things that you had to you were on the Africa desk at the NSC and at the time when the issue of genocide in Rwanda came up and that President Clinton has talked about that and you've reflected on how difficult that was the U.S. just pulled out of Somalia. There was a resistance to getting involved and there was a genocide. What did you what what was what was that experience like? What are your reflections on that in retrospect?

Rice: [00:31:33] Well I actually wasn't responsible for Africa and wasn't working on Africa when the genocide happened. I was the director on the NSC staff responsible for UN affairs and peacekeeping and then in 1995 the year after the genocide I was appointed to be the senior director to run the Africa office on the NSC staff. But I was involved in it from a junior level because I had the U.N. portfolio and we had a U.N. peacekeeping force in there and all this stuff. And it was a searing experience for me. In many ways. I mean first of all I think when people look back on this as you mentioned they forget that seven days before the genocide happened in or began in Rwanda on April 7th 1994 the Congress had ordered the last American troops to leave Somalia after the Blackhawk Down incident which had occurred six months earlier. And so in that context you know the the biggest failure I think we made and as President Clinton has frequently acknowledged was not to even consider and debate the question of whether we or we with others could or should intervene to try to save lives during the height of the genocide. It wasn't even discussed or debated. It wasn't debated in Congress. It wasn't there wasn't advocacy for it on the editorial pages. It seemed like out of the question almost after Congress had done something unprecedented which is order the United States president to withdraw forces from a foreign land stepping on his prerogatives as commander in chief to conceive of going right back into an even more unknown remote part of Africa for something that I think too many people had come to view is almost a routine spasm of of killing just on a greater scale. So that was our first I think that was the first feeling. There were others along the way. I mean you know you could debate the wisdom of this but we backed our Belgian and French allies when they came to the Security Council at the U.N. and asked for in the case of the Belgians permission to withdraw from the peacekeeping force and in the case of the French permission to intervene but the intervention wasn't designed to to help those that were being killed it was designed actually to help the perpetrators escape. And so there were lots of stages at which you can look back on that in hindsight and have considerable reason for regret which I certainly did even though I wasn't even at a decision making level at that stage.

Axelrod: [00:34:29] Years later when you were the ambassador to the United Nations under the Obama administration you were involved in another debate as to whether to intervene in Libya.

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Rice: [00:34:38] Yes.

Axelrod: [00:34:39] How much did the and you were an advocate for that intervention. How much did the experience in your experience and the lessons you took from Rwanda influence your thinking on Libya?

Rice: [00:34:55] They did to some extent but not directly. The echoes were in the sense that Khadafi in 2011 had announced to the world that he was going to exterminate the people of Benghazi and he was lining up the forces to do so and he had a history of it in another context of killing 30000 of his own citizens in one day. So this was a very credible threat. It was a proximate threat and it seemed a context in which we working with others could do something about it. But you know having said that I don't believe that the United States can or should intervene every time there's a moral or humanitarian catastrophe. We have to look at each situation on its merit and ask what is achievable what are our interests what are the risks what are the other commitments we have simultaneously. So I don't think there's a black and white answer to this question but Rwanda beyond Libya has been something that's powerfully affected me and not least because six months after the genocide I traveled with the then National Security Advisor Tony Lake and a number of others to Rwanda. And six months later this genocide was so pervasive that you know we visited a church yard and a school that were one of the places where killing had happened and remember this was machetes people going hand-to-hand killing each other and there were bodies everywhere on the ground. We were stepping over bodies barely able to avoid you know stepping on them. And so that visual image is one that I've

Axelrod: [00:36:53] It's one thing to talk about genocide, its another thing to see it.

Rice: [00:36:56] It's it was the most painful thing I've ever seen.

Axelrod: [00:37:01] Just staying on Libya for a second. President President Obama has said that he he suggests that he has some misgivings about whether that was the right thing to do. Looking at the sort of dystopia that we see there now and some of the problems that we see there now including some some safe havens for for ISIS do you

Rice: [00:37:27] Do I think that was the wrong decision?

Axelrod: [00:37:29] Exactly.

Rice: [00:37:31] No. And I think actually what I've heard the president say is he's thought this through as you know it was a close call then and it's a close call now. I don't think he regrets the decision to join with our NATO partners to intervene. I think what he regrets and I think the big failing was what happened after the intervention the failure on the part of the Europeans who had promised to step up and lead in the post conflict period. Our mistaken assumption that that was a promise we could count on. Because they just lack the capacity and the leadership skills that we have. And so what happened in Libya you know after people were saved lives were protected Gadhafi was removed a new government was trying to form in a place where they been absolutely no government institutions. Gadhafi really ran that as a cult of personality. We the international community including the U.S. were not sufficiently engaged to try to shape that

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post-conflict outcome. And instead of there ever being a coherent national unitary government forming it began to atomize and fracture which is the way it is still today despite our many years of effort subsequently to try to put Humpty Dumpty back together. I spent a lot of time on that issue as national security adviser. But it was it proved to be intractable.

Axelrod: [00:38:59] I mean one of the questions that arises from our whole engagement in that region has been what are the limits of our ability to actually organize or help organize countries when there are such when there's a lack of a civil structure when there are tribal and sectarian you know longstanding differences. You know what should how how much humility should we learn from his experiences about what is possible and what is not?

Rice: [00:39:37] We should have a lot of humility. I mean we are very good at greater or lesser cost depending on how we do it at rooting out terrorism or removing leaders who may be a threat to their people. We are not good with the United States at the post-conflict phase. And we saw that in Iraq after the President Bush's intervention. We continue to see that in Afghanistan. We saw it in spades in Libya. President Obama made a different decision in Syria than he made in Libya. In part perhaps because of that experience. But we are facing that very dilemma now.

Axelrod: [00:40:24] Was that the right decision on Syria?

Rice: [00:40:26] Let me just finish this because that's a whole nother question. But right now having our U.S. military having implemented the plan that President Obama and Secretary Ash Carter and General Dunford committed to in 2015 and 2016 to deal with ISIS in Iraq and Syria and now we've seen you know Raqqa retaken and Mosul retaken is what now? And I'm not seeing evidence that there is a post-conflict plan that we have a theory of how is Syria going to be governed because as much as we want to see Assad go he's not gone and it's not likely that he will be gone. And yet we have an atomized Syria now. And even in Iraq where we have a central government that we want to see succeed it doesn't effectively control all of the territory. So again it's not a unique problem. But we are much much better at the the kinetic aspects of dealing with the threat than we are with the civil aspects.

Axelrod: [00:41:37] One of the things you know I'm I'm not an expert on foreign policy. You'd be the first to point that out. But one thing I learned from my experience is that that is the most important and least often asked question which is what then? The what then question. And it takes you know it is it is easy to charge in and it's never easy to get out. And there are limits to what you can do. Were the wrong lessons learned? I asked about the lessons that you learned from Rwanda as they were carried over to Libya. Were the wrong lessons learned from Libya as carried over to Syria? And should the United States have been should there have been a no fly zone should there have been other sort of interventions? Did the president make a mistake by not intervening at the time of the use of chemical weapons by Assad?

Rice: [00:42:36] Well my view is that this the issue of Syria was and actually remains the hardest policy question on the plates of American decision makers. And so I don't profess to have a easy simple answer to that question. We wrestled for years with the problem of Syria and the current administration continues to do the same. My own view and this will be discussed and debated by historians. My own view at this stage with the benefit of what I knew when I was in government and what hindsight I have is that it was not actually the wrong decision for the president not to intervene militarily when the chemical weapons were used. Why do I say that?

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Well one let's be clear what we mean about intervening. We mean taking strikes at targets inside of Syria. One we were able to remove over 1300 metric tons of chemicals from Syria. We the international community under U.S. leadership. Had we simply struck these targets those weapons would still be there. The difference that makes in practical terms is as you know before 2013 when the weapons were removed Israelis were walking around with gas masks in their briefcases and in their basements. Thats not the case anymore. Those weapons were removed and the bulk of the arsenal as it turned out we thought at the time that the entirety of it but we now know the bulk of it was removed. But the other proof of that point that it wasn't the wrong thing to do not to intervene is what President Trump has demonstrated when he did take strikes this year when there was a fresh use of chemical weapons. And I don't oppose that decision but it proves a point and we still have the same weapons in there. Nothing has changed. He took one night of strikes and we made a political point to the Syrians but we didn't capitalise on it diplomatically. We didn't nothing has changed as a result of those strikes and the remaining weapons or whether they were newly acquired or whether they were hidden away remain and remain a threat. So I would rather have 1300 metric tons out than one night of strikes.

Axelrod: [00:45:09] Were there things whether it was arming the resistance there and I understand that the issue was identifying who it was you were arming or other military actions were there things that in retrospect you think could have been done that would have materially changed where we are right now?

Rice: [00:45:28] Well let me be careful with the premise of your question. I mean there are a number of things that we did do in Syria both with the opposition and with humanitarian assistance and diplomatically that were designed to deal with the Assad threat and end the conflict. We also had under President Obama made the decision to engage in Syria militarily to try to go after ISIS which we have done with considerable success not complete yet and to go after the al Qaeda affiliate then known as al-Nusra in Syria. So we did use military force but not to engage in the civil conflict. And I my own view again this will be discussed and debated by historians is that that was ultimately the right choice. It was a costly choice. But all of the options were bad. It was costly in terms of refugees it was costly in terms of you know the impact of these refugees in Europe. It was costly in terms of you know human lives. But I dont believe that the situation would be materially better for example you mentioned a no fly zone. A no fly zone would not have dealt with the risk and the threat of either chemical weapons or of protecting civilians on the ground in Syria which is why we rejected that option quite frankly in the case of Libya. Its your flying around while stuff is happening on the ground which is quite dangerous and deadly.

Axelrod: [00:46:57] So you don't find yourself saying I wish we had done that because I think that would have made

Rice: [00:47:04] I don't know. I don't have a specific that. I wish the situation had evolved differently. I wish we could have pulled a lever that would have made it better or less bad. I like almost every one of my colleagues I'm sure who had to work on this problem for years it is a very difficult and painful set of issues and I'm not happy by any stretch with where we ended but I also can't turn around and say that was the thing we should have done in retrospect.

Axelrod: [00:47:36] We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with Susan Rice.

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Axelrod: [00:48:06] I can't leave the Libya question without asking you about Benghazi and I want to credit I want to preface my question about your particular experience which kind of bridges foreign policy and politics on this issue by saying this and I don't know that I've ever said this before but when I was the senior strategist for the campaign in 2012 it was my job to brief administration figures before they went on the Sunday shows because everything affected the campaign and there might be some political questions. The Sunday before you went on television after the the tragedy in Benghazi I was called Ben Rhodes called me and said you should not be on this call because this is not a political matter.

Rice: [00:49:01] You were not on the call.

Axelrod: [00:49:02] And I was not on the call. And that tells me something about this notion that this was a sort of you that you were politically motivated in your answers. Like I was a political guy and I was not read into the into the situation. But we know what happened. You went on the Sunday shows. You answered questions about what happened in Benghazi. You described it to a provocative video that had created problems not just in Libya but elsewhere having ignited protests. And in the context of politics that was portrayed as a misdirection play because I guess the notion was the American that the administration didn't want to acknowledge that it was a terrorist attack. So you're you're you're squinting at me which tells me that you think that I'm misrepresenting some things.

Rice: [00:49:59] No just to get the facts right.

Axelrod: [00:50:02] Yes.

Rice: [00:50:04] First of all I never said that it wasn't a terrorist attack. I said it was a terrorist attack.

Axelrod: [00:50:09] It was a question of what provoked it.

Rice: [00:50:09] And I said in one of the interviews I said we need to find out you know was this al Qaeda, al Qaeda affiliates or other forms of extremists? But I what I did do was speak from the talking points that the intelligence community had crafted based on the best information that they had at the time. It was not for me nor would it have been appropriate for me to give my own theory or to freelance or to provide information to the American public that diverged from what the intelligence community understood to be the case at the time. And what I tried and did do on every interview was to make clear that this was the current information we had that it was highly likely to change and that what I was providing was our best current assessment. And our best current assessment from the intelligence community at the time was that what happened in Benghazi was a protest that was inspired by what had happened earlier in places like Cairo where in fact the video was the precipitating factor. And that that protest got hijacked by extremists.

Axelrod: [00:51:25] So this was the video of the guy the preacher down in Florida who burned a Quran.

Rice: [00:51:32] I can't remember the name of the video.

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Axelrod: [00:51:33] And it's probably not worth remembering but that was what was

Rice: [00:51:38] Right. So what happened after that was a week later actually a little more than a week later about 10 or 11 days later the intelligence community garnered more information the FBI got on the ground and they altered the assessment of what had happened and they put it out in writing for the American people to see and they acknowledged in the in their statement this is from the director of National Intelligence that I was working off information that they had provided me but that information has now changed and here was the latest. But in the context and you would have even better perspective on this than I would the red hot context of the campaign and I guess the desperation of President Obama's opponents to try to find an opening that they could utilize to to weaken his candidacy they seized on my statements as if they were as you said some deliberate misrepresentation.

Rice: [00:52:39] Yeah, being that the president having actually gotten good marks on terrorism in having killed bin Laden did not want to acknowledge that al Qaeda was somehow involved. I think that was their that was the theory that was advanced. From my standpoint as a strategist if they wanted to talk about terrorism from that point to the end of the campaign that would have been fine with me because the economy was the issue that was most in contention and that was the vulnerability or the issue that we you know that we were always conscious of. President Obama's standing on this issue was was very very strong but that notwithstanding

Rice: [00:53:21] And just to be clear he was very forthright in calling it a terrorist attack.

Axelrod: [00:53:27] Yeah he was. It was this issue about whether it was al Qaeda or not al Qaeda. It was politics.

Rice: [00:53:33] Which as we know it turns out it was al Qaeda related sorry Libyan extremists with loose affiliation to al Qaeda to this day. But anyway it was

Axelrod: [00:53:45] But for you it became sort of an ordeal.

Rice: [00:53:49] That would be an understatement.

Axelrod: [00:53:50] And may have you know you were at that time considered Secretary Clinton was leaving you were the ambassador of the United Nations and you were considered a leading candidate for secretary of state. I mean so this was a it was a it was a it was a costly damaging period for you.

Rice: [00:54:10] Well I have no idea what President Obama's intentions were with respect to a Secretary of State decision. But you know what I thought initially was something that would I would that I would continue to be a target that was helpful for Fox News and president's opponents to utilize through the campaign became something that persisted in a character assault on me after the campaign. And it was you know if I had stayed in New York as U.N. ambassador which obviously was an option and I would have been happy with that you know this was still something that some folks particularly in Congress and on Fox News were going to continue to utilize again me. That was fine. But what I didn't think was fine was the prospect of a bruising confirmation battle should the president have decided to select me for Secretary of State that would have distracted from the president's ability to get through a lot of his second

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term priorities. I thought we would win. We controlled the Senate. So it wasn't as if I thought if I were nominated I couldn't ultimately be confirmed and nowadays people are confirmed with razor thin margins it seems. I just didn't want me or myself to be the reason why we weren't as an administration and as a nation getting things done.

Axelrod: [00:55:32] Because as it turned out Benghazi continued at great cost and lots of time to be an issue because Secretary Clinton was running for president and therefore was in the political cross hairs.

Rice: [00:55:46] Well that came back later and that was less

Axelrod: [00:55:49] About you yes no no but the issue itself persisted.

Rice: [00:55:53] So I just to close the loop you know I came to the conclusion in December of 2012 that I withdrew my name from consideration for secretary of state.

Axelrod: [00:56:05] And you became the national security adviser for the president.

Rice: [00:56:10] Which was also a good job.

Axelrod: [00:56:11] Yes not a bad job but a challenging job. And I want to talk to you about a couple of the issues that you dealt with then because they're still with us today. One is North Korea. You know you're obviously steeped in the most current developments but they seem to be churning toward an intercontinental ballistic missile that could carry a nuclear weapon and they have they have frustrated administrations Republican and Democrat for decades. What do you what do you think the appropriate approach now is and do the critics have a point does Trump President Trump have a point when he says well they've been they've been they've been defying us and we have to take a different approach?

Rice: [00:57:02] Well. I don't I don't think he's got a credible point in the sense that you're right going back to successive administrations. Clinton. Bush Forty three. Obama. Now Trump. We have had a consistent and growing problem of North Korea's nuclear missile threat. And the Clinton administration tried both diplomacy in a in a very robust way to try to address the threat that was unfortunately reversed by the Bush administration early on. And so we don't know if that would have really borne fruit but probably not. The Clinton administration also very seriously considered and you can hear Secretary former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry talk about this and Ash Carter a preemptive strike on Pyongyang and they determined that the costs in terms of lives and to American military personnel and to the people of South Korea was so excessive that that was not a wise decision.

Axelrod: [00:58:18] And that's probably more true today.

Rice: [00:58:20] It's more true today because the capacity of the North Koreans has increased. We still have almost 30000 U.S. military personnel you know north of Seoul south of the DMZ. We have hundreds of thousands of Americans in South Korea. We have a 25 million person population just in Seoul which is in close proximity to the border with North Korea and in range of North Korea's substantial non-nuclear artillery capacity and missile capacity. So you know I this is a thorny problem which successive administrations have dealt with through diplomacy

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through pressure through sanctions through every tool in the toolbox without success. And to the extent that there are those in the current administration who either rhetorically or actually are contemplating the the preemptive use of military force to deal with this I think they are not weighing the risks versus the benefits in a thoughtful way. The military our military will be the first to describe the risks. The benefits would only be worth the risk if we actually had the ability and capacity to take out his entire missile capacity and his entire nuclear capacity and without going into any detail I think that's probably a mistaken assumption. And then you have to ask yourself why and now to get to your question what do I think we ought to be doing today why we cannot deter and contain the North Korean threat through very clear articulation of what will happen in North Korea if they ever use nuclear weapons against us or our allies or if they ever sell a nuclear weapon to a third party. We can deal with this problem through deterrence. Its a much lesser problem than the threat we deterred successfully from the Soviet Union for decades. And yet we are approaching this with conflicting signals. Blurry red lines. Blustery threats from our president that you know get as low and as degrading as Kim Jong Un's threats.

Axelrod: [01:00:48] Do they have any practical implication though, the president's provocation?

Rice: [01:00:51] I think they do because I think I worry much more about the risk of unintended conflict in the current context with North Korea than I do about uou know a collective decision although I don't rule this out that the United States would take preemptive action.

Axelrod: [01:01:10] So Kim thinking that there would be might be preemptive action and therefore acting first.

Axelrod: [01:01:14] Exactly. That's a risk. Let me just ask you about Iran. You were deeply involved in the process of negotiating the Iran agreement the agreement that the president calls the worst in the history of mankind.

Rice: [01:01:24] President Trump calls it that.

Axelrod: [01:01:25] President Trump. Yes.

Rice: [01:01:28] I'm not even sure he's actually read it but that is what he says.

Axelrod: [01:01:33] But he's taken the step of not certifying and now Congress has probably 45 days to try to act or not act. Where do you think this is going and what is the risk do you think of this escalating into a confrontation with Iran?

Rice: [01:01:57] Here unlike in the case of North Korea where we have an opponent with actual nuclear weapons and actual growing capacity to deliver them. Iran has no nuclear weapons. It is far from having the ability to produce nuclear weapons. And the agreement that President Obama and the other members of the P5 plus 1 struck with Iran would verifiably and unequivocally prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon through any possible pathway. And so to risk that agreement throw it away when it is verifiably working. And it's not just you know me who's saying that its what the IAEA the International Atomic Energy Agency is saying its what the chairman of our joint chiefs of staff is saying its what the leadership of our intelligence community is saying. This is what all the allies are saying and the secretary of defense. Everybody agrees that the deal is working and Iran is upholding its obligations. For us to blow it

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up or to risk it by Congress making an ill fated decision designed to kill it with a thousand cuts would be the height of stupidity. We have an agreement that is preventing a potential adversary from acquiring a weapon that could harm us or our allies Israel the Gulf partners and for us to jettison the agreement would put us in opposition not only to Iran but more importantly to our European allies who are with us in this agreement. We would be the ones to blame. Not Iran. Iran would be free to pursue a new nuclear weapon because we abrogated the agreement. And we would not be able to get the European countries the Russians and the Chinese who are also in the deal and believe it's working and the entire international community to join with us in the reimposition of sanctions. So its a win win win for Iran they get they get the ability to pursue a nuclear weapon. There is no constraint on them and we are isolated. That's the height of stupidity. And then we'd have two nuclear threats that are proximate simultaneously rather than just one.

Axelrod: [01:04:23] Before we before we go I need to ask you you've devoted a lot of your life to international institutions the United Nations and building other relationships globally. We seem to be retreating from some of those and United Nations has come under some attack by the president. NATO's come under attack by the president. What are the implications of that?

Rice: [01:05:00] They're very serious. And what's happening is the United States is voluntarily retreating from our global historic global leadership role and it's not just you know in the United Nations you mentioned NATO which is where he has called into grave question our commitment to our closest allies. We've withdrawn from the Paris climate agreement. We've put the Iran agreement in jeopardy. We've withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership a trade agreement that we orchestrated that would have strengthened our position in the Asia Pacific. And as we withdraw others are moving to fill the void. Most notably China. And you know the system of alliances and relationships that have preserved and protected our global leadership and served our interest so well are being undermined by us not by them. So this is shortsighted. It's dangerous. It's not good for our economy. It's not good for our national security. But it is apparently the preference of the president and many in his administration.

Axelrod: [01:06:14] And has some political resonance with his base.

Rice: [01:06:17] Well I mean I don't I think America first as a slogan has resonance with his base. It's a slogan as you know that was most prominently employed during the thirties in World War II.

Axelrod: [01:06:34] For people who didn't want to get us involved in the fight against Germany.

Rice: [01:06:36] Right.

Axelrod: [01:06:36] But the fact of the matter is every American president has put U.S. interests and values ahead of anything else. But the difference between what President Bush I mean President excuse me President Trump is advocating and what all prior presidents since World War II have adhered to is President Trump's theory is that we put America first by making America stand alone. Everybody else has taken the view that America is stronger and our interests are best served when we have countries and allies and partners around the world that are willing to work with us in our shared interests. And I firmly believe that the traditional bipartisan perspective on the importance of America's leadership not in isolation but in

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coordination with those who share our interests and values is a far better way to secure our interests as America first so to speak then to become isolated lonely and nobody willing to work with us when it isn't convenient.

Axelrod: [01:07:51] Do you think these are reversible

Rice: [01:07:54] A great question.

Axelrod: [01:07:55] I mean if in fact America this void is filled by the Chinese and others if our allies come to believe that they are better off working among themselves and with others can that be recovered?

Rice: [01:08:09] I don't know. I worry a lot about that every day David. The risk is that the world becomes accustomed to you know a universe in which we are not a leader where they do not feel obliged to take into consideration the the call or the request of the American president where they do not count on us to stand for human rights and democracy and the rule of law and the values that are so dear to us where they become accustomed to you know autocratic leadership going unchallenged. And there is a real risk in my opinion that the world does not make room for us to come back and take our seat at the global leadership table at the head of the table if we've left our plate and you know and our seat empty for any length of time. I'm struck every day by how quickly President Trump's approach has damaged our global standing. I mean it's only been 10 months and it's it's very palpable how serious it is. I don't know where we are after four years.

Axelrod: [01:09:30] One other thing I have to ask you about. You made a trip to Capitol Hill recently and testified to a closed session about that interim period between the election and the inauguration of President Trump and the issue of intelligence as it related to Russian intervention in our elections contacts between people who had some relationship with the president potentially but actors who are named in intelligence whose names you unmasked in or reportedly unmasked so explain what that is and tell us everything that you that you can about what actually happened.

Rice: [01:10:21] Well first of all I did have voluntary interviews with both the Senate Intelligence and the House Intelligence Committees pertaining to their Russian investigations. The bulk of the questions that were asked of me and that and all of which I answered were about Russia and Russia's role in interfering in our election.

Axelrod: [01:10:44] And I presume you embrace the the the intelligence the the verdict of the intelligence community that Russia did actively try and intervene in our election.

Rice: [01:10:52] I absolutely accept it without question.

Axelrod: [01:10:54] Not a hoax.

Rice: [01:10:55] Its not. No. Russia intervned in the U.S. election in 2012 with the aim of trying.

Axelrod: [01:11:02] 2016.

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Rice: [01:11:03] 2016. Thank you. With the aim of trying to benefit President Trump. No doubt about that. So I was a national security adviser for the six months roughly in which this was a policy concern so I think it was very appropriate and I was very happy to participate in the investigations.

Axelrod: [01:11:21] On this issue of unmasking.

Rice: [01:11:23] On the issue of Russian interference. I was also asked

Axelrod: [01:11:26] No but I'm asking you on the issue of

Axelrod: [01:11:28] I'm coming to that. So I was also asked about this question of did I as has been alleged in some quarters inappropriately request the identity of Americans whose names were redacted or masked in intelligence reports.

Axelrod: [01:11:47] Which is standard procedure to mask those names.

Rice: [01:11:49] Yes it is. And to request those names for some nefarious purpose and then as some have alleged to leak it. And I was very clear with the committees as I've said in public that I never leaked classified information. I did not inappropriately or for anything other than the purpose of doing the job of national security adviser ask for the identity of an American citizen. And when those identities are provided to me or others who are able to ask they are provided just to us and not to a wider audience. And these are not things that we go around talking about loosely because they are classified and they are protected identities of American citizens. And I was gratified that after my interview both in the Senate and in the house that members of the majority party without disclosing classified information from the session validated publicly that I had been forthcoming had cooperated fully and that they did not see issues that caused them concern.

Axelrod: [01:12:57] Did the things that you learned from that intelligence and from that unmasking cause you to be more reticent about sharing information with some members of President Trump's team or president elect Trump's team?

Rice: [01:13:12] No I mean these are apples and oranges. No. I was I'm not going to get into the substance of the kinds of reports that I received or that the context in which I may have asked for the identities of American citizens. The only reason that I would have and the only reason I ever would and did request the identity of an American citizen was to understand more fully the significance of the report that I was being provided by the intelligence community. If it if there was a suggestion that American for example was involved in buying or selling prohibited equipment or material that could be used in a terrorist attack or was involved in a crime or was involved in making or or pretending to make policy on behalf of the U.S. government when they weren't in a position to do so.

Axelrod: [01:14:06] Which could have been that could have been this instance.

Rice: [01:14:09] These would be the kinds of things that would cause me as national security advisor concern and frankly it's my strong view and I think the view of most anybody who is familiar with national security policy making that for me not to ask and not to understand the

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import of the reports that I was reading would have been negligent and I took my job as national security adviser very seriously. I did my utmost to consume all of the information that was provided me to understand it and to act on it or at least present for decision whether we ought to act on it as best I could.

Axelrod: [01:14:50] Are you done with public service or do you see yourself once again serving the country in some form or fashion?

Rice: [01:14:58] The short answer is I don't know. I don't I never say never. But I'm also living my life in such a way that it is not my plan or expectation to come back.

Axelrod: [01:15:09] You're working on a book.

Rice: [01:15:10] I'm working on a book but I'm doing a number of different things. But I am 52 years old. I've had an extraordinary opportunity to serve and at levels that I am very very grateful for. I love public service. I love serving our country. I've loved serving President Obama and working with President Clinton. But you know if I never get a chance to serve in government again I will feel as though I have had a great run and I am very much thinking about what is the next chapter for me in all likelihood outside of government in the nonprofit sector in the private sector in academia. I haven't decided which of those I want to jump into.

Axelrod: [01:16:03] Well given your history and lineage I'm sure whatever it is there'll be other chapters. So Susan Rice it's always good to be with you and again thank you for coming and speaking at the Institute of Politics and engaging with a bunch of eager students.

Rice: [01:16:20] Thanks for having me. It was great fun.