

Interview - David Rothkopf

Written by E-International Relations

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David J. Rothkopf is CEO and Editor of the FP Group, which publishes Foreign Policy magazine. He is also the President and CEO of Garten Rothkopf, an international advisory company specializing in global political risk, energy, resource, technology and emerging markets issues based in Washington, D.C.

He is a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, chairman of the National Strategic Investment Dialogue and serves or has served as a member of the advisory boards of the Center for Global Development, the Center for the Study of the Presidency, the U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Previously David served as CEO of Intellibridge Corporation, Managing Director of Kissinger Associates and as both U.S. Deputy Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade and as Acting Under Secretary. Besides teaching and lecturing in international affairs at numerous leading universities, he is the author of numerous internationally acclaimed books, including his most recent, *National Insecurity: American Leadership in an Age of Fear* (2014).

As CEO and Editor of Foreign Policy, where do you see the most exciting developments taking place within journalism?

I think this is a golden era of journalism. The reality is that the internet has enabled anyone with the inclination to reach out and to touch an ever larger audience. While that is a formula for entry into the field of unqualified people and unsubstantiated facts, and that's something to be watched out for, audiences, as it turns out, are smart and they tend to gravitate particularly when it comes to serious news and to serious publications. Quality still drives. It just means that the barriers to entry are lower and the potential audiences are larger. For those who are seeking specialised news or news on far away places, the opportunities to get that news easily are much much greater. While there are downsides to the tech revolution, I think the upsides outweigh them. I think we're in a remarkable period.

For anybody who's writing anything, the development of the internet and the development of search engines, makes it much easier to research. Combined with an ability to use the internet to reach out and touch people essentially revolutionises the whole process. The fact that we're on the verge of a moment in history where effectively everybody on the planet is connected in a man-made system for the very first time, means people can extend queries, exchange information, and be informed of developments in ways that weren't possible before. If you turn the world into a single cultural ecosystem for the very first time, I think that's a development with seismic implications that we're all beginning to grasp.

The subtitle to your recently reprinted book *National Insecurity is, American Leadership in an Age of Fear*. Why are we living in an age of fear?

The title refers to the post-9/11 period, particularly in the United States, when in the wake of the attacks there was a natural reaction of shock to the fact that a small group on the other side of the world can lay waste to parts of lower Manhattan and kill thousands of people. Politicians responded to it both by trying to capitalise on that fear in order to advance their agendas and by exacerbating the fears through bad policy choices, and I think much of American foreign policy has been driven over the course of the last fifteen years by fear. Fear of small, unaffiliated, hard-to-identify actors out there who pose some threat but nothing like the existential threat posed by the Soviet Union during

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the Cold War, nor the Nazis during World War II. We have to ask ourselves: why does this relatively contained threat have such broad implications for our foreign national security policy? Why have we essentially reordered our entire U.S. national security system in order to address this one threat? I think the only conclusion you can draw from this is that it's the amplification of the threat as a consequence of fear which is precisely the goal of a terrorist.

What responsibility do you believe the media holds in instilling this pervasive fear?

The media has some responsibility. At the end of the day, audiences have at least as great a responsibility as I in taking the media with a grain of salt. Politicians have responsibility with presenting the media with certain limited views to the facts. I think it's a collective breakdown of our system that allows us to go into massive, costly, undertakings for flawed rationales.

You have argued in the book that the Bush administration's response after 9/11 was the wrong course of action. What course should the Bush administration have taken after 9/11?

Any president of the United States or of any country, if they were attacked by a bad actor such as al Qaeda, would have sought to respond to al Qaeda. I think any president would have wanted some kind of attack into Afghanistan. Almost any president would have used the severity of the attack to escalate from the kinds of missile attacks that we've been doing, to special forces and over the horizon weapons, whether it's drones or cruise missiles plus intelligence. I think the targets should have been the leadership of al Qaeda and the objectives should've been to punish them for their actions.

Beyond that, I think we should have recognised that the broader threat has to do with extremism, not al Qaeda, and that extremism is caused by a number of factors. From the failure of institutions and societies where extremists are likely found to deal with the economic and political needs of the people, to the failure of institutions particularly within the Sunni world to represent Sunni interests in a way that did not leave an opening to al Qaeda or ISIS to step in. I think a lot of what we could have done to fight terrorism would have fallen much more under the ambit of intelligence and more police action, in order to ensure that terrorists were identified and tracked down. But the notion of going into a conventional war against a conventional enemy was just tactically and strategically wrong.

You have praised President Bush in that he demonstrated a learning curve. The final years in office you argue, were an improvement and he deserves credit. Can that same learning curve be applied to President Obama?

All presidents have learning curves and I was trying to be objective with regards to Bush who I believe made catastrophic errors in his first term, but his foreign policy improved in measurable ways in his second time. I think Obama has grown as president and I think his greatest successes have been domestic. I don't think he has learned on the foreign policy front, and in fact I think he's been resistant to the idea of learning. I think he associates many of the steps that would be associated with learning about foreign policy elites but I think he's predisposed to be unsympathetic towards. As a result I think his growth as a foreign policy president has been remarkably limited and in fact probably less good than any president I can remember in modern history. I think his foreign policy will be seen as failed in many respects, even as I think many of his domestic policies will be seen as successes. Ultimately, I think he'll get a mixed grade from historians.

Looking at 2016, what do you make of the foreign policy debates in the Democratic and Republican primaries?

When I wrote my book I was hopeful that the 'Age of Fear' would be ending and that we would be moving into a period in which we could focus forward again and have an aspirational foreign policy. What has happened is that, particularly on the Republican side, there has been a focus on rekindling the fears; fear of the other, fear of Muslims, fear of Mexicans, fear of foreigners, and put up walls, go after people, hit them harder, use coercive measures of interrogation, opening the door to using nuclear weapons against ISIS. A whole host of things that are over-the-top and that can be considered nonsensical.

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The ascendancy of Donald Trump is the reaffirmation that fear drives politics for a lot of people. Donald Trump is a populist demagogue, who has no foreign policy experience and has no facts to draw on. He's made a motto of his campaign, 'America First', which was a slogan used by isolationists prior to World War II who were seen as being aware of one of the causes of the war.

Bernie Sanders doesn't really have any foreign policy experience, has not been very thoughtful and that leaves Hillary Clinton who probably knows more about foreign policy than anyone who's run for president since George H.W. Bush. She is incredibly well qualified to manage US foreign policy and is in fact likely going to win. It's an interesting contrast where fear mongers and know-nothings have dominated the headlines but at the end of the day, we may end up with the most qualified, most moderate, most traditional, US foreign policy view in the White House.

What would you say is the most important advice, either for a young journalist or a student of international relations?

The best advice is to understand what you care about and move from thinking about it, to taking action to impact it. I think the biggest mistake that journalists make and academics makes is failing to frame the questions properly. I think we're at a big watershed in history and many of the questions that we have to discuss are to do with the past decade. As we stand on the verge of a wired world in which the nature of warfare, money, social interaction, identity, our basic view of human rights, of foreign affairs and of culture, are all going to change in profound ways and ways that we perhaps haven't seen since the Renaissance. Perhaps we ought to be thinking about those big future issues, and less caught up on these minor, incremental task issues as we have been. Look ahead and ask the right questions. When you find the right answers, try to translate them into some kind of action. Whether it's in international affairs or journalism, the people who know the most and work the hardest do the best job.