



Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs: A Conversation with U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse

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- Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, *U.S. Senator for Rhode Island*
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TRANSCRIPT

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WALTER RUSSELL MEAD: All right, everyone. Like to welcome you to this session in our series of Mead dialogues with senior policymakers and elected officials. Every time I hear that phrase, Mead dialogue, I hope it goes better than the "Melian Dialogue," which we teach in my strategy classes. So member - Senator Sheldon Whitehouse has served as U.S. senator for Rhode Island since 2007, a member of the Senate Budget, Environmental and Public Works, Judiciary and Finance Committees. Senator Whitehouse also serves on the Commission of - on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control.

MEAD: Prior to his election to the Senate, Senator Whitehouse served as director of the Rhode Island Department of Business Regulation from 1992 to 1994, United States attorney for Rhode Island between 1994 and 1998 and as Rhode Island attorney general from 1999 to 2003. Senator Whitehouse is a graduate of Yale University and University of Virginia School of Law. At Hudson Institute, we've come to admire Senator Whitehouse for his passion, commitment and skillful advocacy on a family of issues that's very important to us - kleptocracy, the use of dirty money and hidden financial flows by hostile foreign governments and efforts to manipulate the political processes of democratic countries.

MEAD: On these issues, Senator Whitehouse has been a steadfast, longtime national leader. He identified the problems early on, has been working on them effectively. And I can say that our Kleptocracy Initiative staff consider themselves huge fans. So thank you, Senator, on behalf of Hudson Institute and, indeed, the whole country for your leadership and vision on this issue. Before jumping into the conversation, like to say something about the speaker series and our goals for it. I've never been comfortable, either as a journalist or a citizen, with the kind of gotcha journalism that aims to push politicians into making gaffes. Journalists should aim higher.

SHELDON WHITEHOUSE: I can make my own just fine.

MEAD: (Laughter) No pushing required.

WHITEHOUSE: No pushing required.

MEAD: But our job really shouldn't be, I think, to try to trip up politicians with clever questions, but to ask questions that reveal politician - allow politicians to share their thoughts, their perceptions and then allow viewers and readers to judge for themselves whether what they're hearing makes sense or is useful. This is a bipartisan series. We welcome Democrats like Jake Sullivan and Senator Coons from Delaware, as well as Republicans like Senators McCain and Cotton.

MEAD: Now more than ever, when our country is divided over difficult issues at home and faces complicated and growing challenges abroad, it's important that Americans of many different viewpoints work together on issues that matter not only to everyone in America but to people all over the world. So thank you, Senator, for taking the time today to be with us.

MEAD: Our format will be a conversational interview. I'll ask some questions. Senator Whitehouse will respond. And then we will open it up for written questions from the audience in the last few minutes. Ask you to be aware that the senator is trying to give us as much time as possible, but he has to get to

an appointment in the - at the Senate. So let's stay seated until he has a chance to leave at the end of our conversation. All right. Well, so...

WHITEHOUSE: While Walter sorts himself out, let me start by thanking Hudson Institute for inviting me and to say, to reciprocate, it has been a true pleasure dealing with Hudson on these kleptocracy issues. I think there's a real national security component that I'm sure we'll talk about here. This isn't just a question about trying to do kind of generally good things in the world. This is a place where our national interest is deeply implicated.

WHITEHOUSE: And I was also invited by Hudson some years ago to come and speak about that little crucible of conflict, Kashmir, and the Himalayan glaciers and what the dangers of competition over river flow and water could mean for that fractious place. And, of course, Hudson knew full well that that was going to be a conversation about climate change, climate change and climate change. So I appreciate very much that invitation too because we weren't having much of a conversation in Washington about that issue back then.

MEAD: No, and I hope we'll be able to get into some of those issues today as well. So how did you first get involved in this kleptocracy issue? What was your first sign that there was something that needed to be done here?

WHITEHOUSE: I am the son, grandson and nephew of Foreign Service officers. And my father's Foreign Service career was not exactly the champagne circuit. We spent a lot of time in difficult countries and in countries at difficult times. And I learned in my childhood how perilous it can be when you don't have rule of law in places and when you have ruling classes or oligarchs or tyrants who loot their countries. And I also became a deep believer in American exceptionalism, indispensability, city on a hill, all of that.

WHITEHOUSE: And so the idea that we, a city on a hill, could be providing aid and comfort to those from the more wicked side of the world where they are engaged in wholesale looting and kleptocracy, just - it's not a good look for a city on a hill, let's put it that way. And that was something I learned my entire life. It's an instinct, almost, with me to steer away from that.

MEAD: Yeah, I think the nature of kleptocracy and the challenge that it poses has been changing, that, originally, you know, I think when you - or your father was in the Foreign Service and even early on, under Putin and so on, oligarchs and kleptocrats were often - sometimes they were the leaders, but generally they were people acting on their private interests. They've stolen money or obtained money in dubious ways at home, and they want to stash it overseas where the tax authorities or criminal authorities can never find it. And that's bad enough.

WHITEHOUSE: Yeah.

MEAD: And it's a problem in terms of governance in many countries that the international financial system is almost offering asylum for stolen money.

WHITEHOUSE: Correct.

MEAD: But then we've seen I think, particularly in both Russia and China in recent years, a shift, whereas the government has gotten more control over the economy and the oligarchs, this same money is now available - in a sense, is being used for state purposes and can be integrated with the foreign policy of a hostile state or at least a challenging one.

WHITEHOUSE: It can be. It also can be used and has been used to support bribery and corruption of foreign governments, to fund parties that are trying to create dissension and disarray in foreign countries. And the very same shell corporation, dark-money screens that protect the money that the kleptocrats steal can also be used not just as the end point...

MEAD: Right.

WHITEHOUSE: ...But as the launch point for political efforts. So you can be a crooked Russian oligarch. You can hide your money in a U.S. shell corporation, and it can just sit there till you want to come and cash in. Or, from that shell corporation, you could buy Facebook ads in politics. And these days, the farthest Facebook looks is to the nominal buyer. So the idea that the mechanisms for hiding these assets are the end point is, I think, what has changed. They are now launch points as often as end points.

MEAD: So this has turned a - kind of a good governance issue into a national security...

WHITEHOUSE: Into a national security issue. And then, you know, I mean, Ronald Reagan used to love to say that we're a city on a hill, echoing our early New England settlers. And President Clinton used to love to say that the power of our example has always mattered more than any example of our power. So when we become aiders and abettors of that kind of misconduct, not only are we helping people who are directly attacking us, but we're also damaging one of our greatest assets, our brand. And no city on a hill looks good when its sewers are filled with foreign, corrupt money, and everybody knows it.

MEAD: I'm not sure everyone here or watching this knows exactly what you mean by shell corporation. Sort of lay that out a little bit for folks.

WHITEHOUSE: Sure. A shell corporation is an entity that essentially does no business, has no activities and provides a corporate screen to hide the identity of the real actor. And unfortunately, what we're seeing now, particularly in states like Delaware and Nevada and South Dakota, is that the secrecy provisions and the ease of setting up these corporations allows people from all around the world to do it very readily and then to hide from inquiry as to who they are. So it really hobbles law enforcement. It really enables criminal activity and, again, not a good look for our city on a hill.

MEAD: And so...

WHITEHOUSE: We've got bills pending and a lot of bipartisan enthusiasm. The bill that I like the best is the one that Chuck Grassley and I wrote. There's also activity in finance and in banking on the same subject. Secretary Mnuchin has made strong, strong statements about the importance of this. And in the hearing today, two of his subordinates were in for hearing, and this was a big topic. And they re-emphasized Treasury's strong position on this. So I think we're - and even the Delaware secretary of state has said, OK, (laughter) we give - we'll give. We'll help clean this mess up.

MEAD: That's extraordinary.

WHITEHOUSE: Yeah, it's a big change. It's a big change in the last two or three years.

MEAD: And so you have hopes we'll see legislation before 2020.

WHITEHOUSE: I think we will. We've been promised a hearing on our bill in judiciary, and banking is moving. And you get - you know, on the Democratic side of the aisle, you've got Senator Warner, who's very keen on this. And, of course, he sees it also in his role as the ranking member on the Intelligence Committee or the vice chair, as we say in intelligence. So I think it's really sunk in - the national security component of this. That's what has got Lindsey so interested. We had a great hearing, thanks to Chairman Graham on this. And David Petraeus wrote a terrific article with me on this subject.

WHITEHOUSE: So I think it's really penetrated that we are, in fact, in a clash of civilizations, but the clash of civilizations was slightly misdefined (ph). It's actually rule of law land versus corruption, criminality and terror land. And rule of law land puts itself in a terrible predicament when it is aiding and abetting those who looted most successfully in criminal kleptocracy and terror lands.

MEAD: I think it's really terrific that - and the work that you've done has been great. And I'm certainly hoping we'll see a different situation soon. What else needs to be done? We've got elections coming up in 2020. And it's crystal clear that - we've had Dan Coats - has spoken here about the danger. You know, if you read the Mueller report, there's an awful lot in there about, I think, how sophisticated Russian actions actually were. It was not just a few sort of clumsy interventions, but you've got, obviously, some very intelligent, very well-resourced people out there looking to disrupt our own internal processes.

WHITEHOUSE: Yeah.

MEAD: What do we need to do for 2020?

WHITEHOUSE: Well, I would say, roughly, you can put things into three buckets. Bucket one is interfering with the actual vote tally - that Joe Jones votes for Senator Smith, and instead, the vote gets registered as for Senator Johnson.

MEAD: So you're, like, hacking the voting machines.

WHITEHOUSE: You're hacking the voting machines. You're interfering with the integrity of the transmission of the vote. That, I think, we seem to be fairly well on top of. And we get good reports about being on top of that from the intelligence community, and there's no known instance of that happening. So it's something to watch, but I think we're in reasonably good shape. The second is political money flowing in to us. And unfortunately, we are very vulnerable, still, in that area.

WHITEHOUSE: We maintain a whole variety of mechanisms for dark money to flow into American elections - donor-advised trusts, 501(c)(4)s, shell corporations, all of that. Sadly, there is a domestic constituency for that of big special interests who want to hide their own hands while they play in our politics.

WHITEHOUSE: But the problem is that once you have a channel that is - that provides anonymity, you can't distinguish between who is an anonymous domestic influencer and who is an anonymous foreign influencer. Anonymity wipes out that distinction. You simply can't do it. So we have to take a hard look at that, knowing full well that there are going to be domestic interests to take a dim view of reforming that part of it.

WHITEHOUSE: And the last - third bucket is the influence of the public debate. And that gets really difficult and - because, you know, you hide through a few screens and, pretty soon, you have what looks like an American exercising their First Amendment rights, which we treasure and protect. But somehow, you've got to know that if it's not a real American - if it's a front, if it's a shell, if it's a phony ID on some program on Facebook or whatever - you've got to be able to address that.

MEAD: It's a huge problem. I mean, I - a lot of people sort of had this idea that somehow American power has diminished or is diminishing. But, in fact, the impact of the U.S. on other countries is enormous. And the drive to somehow be able to manipulate or control or even just influence the way the United States makes decisions is so important for so many foreign countries. I don't think people here fully get just how determined folks are and how much - how many of the smartest people in the world are trying to manipulate this process.

WHITEHOUSE: And they really don't have to do much to succeed. They have huge advantages. They can throw 90 or a hundred of these at us. And if only five or 10 get through, they're - they've won on those.

MEAD: Right.

WHITEHOUSE: And they usually don't have a particular goal. They don't want to see a particular bill passed. There is no positive outcome that they seek. It is simply disarray, dissension and discord. And you can do that very, very readily. It's the easiest first step. I mean, anybody can raise hell. It's when you have to try to, like, go through and get something accomplished that the job gets more difficult. So they win at the very earliest stage of simply coming in and just raising discord.

MEAD: That's exactly right. The more we scream at each other, the happier they are.

WHITEHOUSE: They really are.

MEAD: And to throw little apples of discord into our discourse.

WHITEHOUSE: Yeah. And it would be - it would help if we set a better example ourselves. My mother used to have a phrase when I had a bug bite or a scratch, which is, don't pick it.

MEAD: (Laughter).

WHITEHOUSE: And when we have fights, you know, the very first thing that many of our political leaders and a lot of our press do is they go pick it and - instead of giving it a chance to heal. And it's become almost a national activity now. And of course, when we're doing it so much - makes it even easier for the foreign forces to come sliding in the tide.

MEAD: Now, this is a serious problem and at a time when we're very polarized, in part, I think, because foreign actors have been trying to inflame those polarizations. It is difficult to think about how do we find our way back to some kind of rational discourse. But thank you for what you're doing.

WHITEHOUSE: I do think that there's a citizenship issue here. If you look at the way we eat compared to when I was a kid, if you look at our attitude towards pollution compared to when I was a kid, we as a society have had huge moves. The Cuyahoga River lit fire. And we said, oh, that ends that. We're going to do a lot better on pollution. And we realized that our diet of white bread and TV dinners and canned vegetables wasn't working.

WHITEHOUSE: And so now Whole Foods is a massive enterprise instead of a thing out back where you wore funny shoes and had to buy your peanuts by the bag and bring your own bag. So we've had these two shifts. And, in the same way, I think we need to have a similar shift as consumers of news and information.

MEAD: Interesting.

WHITEHOUSE: You know, we have to recognize that there's pollution in this space, and we have to recognize that there's junk food in this space. And we have to become more adept consumers at protecting ourselves from the pollution and not eating the junk food.

MEAD: Well, that's...

WHITEHOUSE: And we've done it. I mean, that's supposed to be, like, a good sign 'cause we did in those two spaces.

MEAD: I think there's been some evidence in recent weeks that Russia and China are beginning to coordinate much more closely than before and coordinate in ways that are inimicable (ph) to our interests.

WHITEHOUSE: The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

MEAD: So is that going to make 2020 - in some ways, the Chinese have more resources than the Russians. And they've developed different - the two have developed complementary ways of intervening and interfering. Do you think we face a kind of stepped up problem here?

WHITEHOUSE: I think we - you know, I think we may, but I think there are some very fundamental differences between Russia and China. And the most fundamental of them is that I think China, A, is succeeding and, B, thinks it's succeeding. It may want to succeed faster, and it may want to pull dirty tricks like stealing our intellectual property to accelerate its success. But I do think that it is both succeeding and thinks that it's succeeding. So it comes at high-risk propositions from a different point of view than Russia.

WHITEHOUSE: I think Russia is failing, and I think Putin knows that it is failing - whether it's their drinking; whether it's their drug addiction; whether it's their brain drain; whether it's their vanished

economy; whether it's their, you know, pension and other expense load; whether it's just their general poverty; whether it's their life expectancy. I mean, there's a reason he has to create all this drama overseas to try to keep the population distracted.

WHITEHOUSE: My buddy John McCain used to say that Russia is a big, giant gas station with a corrupt owner and an army. And the gas station - going to be selling as much gas in a decade. So for a whole lot of reasons, I think if you are an intelligent Russian reading the economic and demographic data about your own country, you are not thinking that you're winning. And that puts them in a completely different mindset in terms of risk.

WHITEHOUSE: I think they're willing to throw the table over. I think they're willing to do all sorts of very dangerous things because the game, as it's presently set out on the table, where it's presently laid, is one that they are destined to lose. And that makes them much more dangerous to me than the Chinese.

MEAD: I agree with you. I think, too, the Chinese see some advantages in having a player who's willing to throw over the table. They can kind of work with that in various ways.

WHITEHOUSE: They are subtle and smart and play a long game.

MEAD: I'm going to get onto climate issues in a minute here. But I did want to ask one more sort of foreign policy question, which is, there's a lot of talk these days that support for Israel is becoming a partisan and divisive issue. But I know we saw in the House yesterday - there was a massive bipartisan majority in favor of the vote on BDS...

WHITEHOUSE: Yeah.

MEAD: ...Boycotts. From where you sit on the Democratic side of the Senate, is this becoming a partisan issue?

WHITEHOUSE: This is one of those weird issues where you see something in the paper, and you look in your own experience. And there's zero reflection of it. You sit around the Democratic caucus, and there is none of this conversation taking place. I think that there is enormous and very proper bipartisan support of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship both because they're a good ally but also because they have been, for a very long time, a very good exemplar of our principles in a very, very tough neighborhood. And so that to me is very much of a given.

WHITEHOUSE: I do think that there are mischievous forces at work, both in Israel and in the U.S., to try to load up that relationship with partisan overtones. And I think that a lot of the strongest voices for that relationship have cottoned onto that and realized that the short-term gain is offset by long-term cost to that relationship. This is - somebody who truly values and supports the U.S.-Israel relationship would not play in that mischievous space.

WHITEHOUSE: But I do think there is considerable mischief, and I think it's behind some of these resolutions that are designed to create division and discord. I think the fundamental strength of the

U.S.'s relationship is strong, and if it's left alone, it will stay strong. And I think the efforts at mischief and manipulation will fail. But I do think that they are a shame.

MEAD: Well, let's move now to climate change and the environment, which is another one of the issues where you've really kind of distinguished yourself in being a leader and a prime mover of this. What - again, what made you decide and how did you decide to make climate change a central issue of your career in the Senate?

WHITEHOUSE: When I got to the Senate, we were really bipartisan on climate. Senator McCain was the Republican nominee. He had a great climate platform. I count in the years '07, '08 and '09, my first three years in the Senate, five different bipartisan Senate climate bills that all would've done something really significant. They weren't little nibbly-around-the-edges bills. They were real, strong, great pieces of legislation in bipartisan hearings, bipartisan conversations. I'm married to a scientist. I believe in science. I've - I'm exposed to nature a lot. I know very well what's going on.

WHITEHOUSE: So when 2010 came, and all of that came to a dead stop, to me, that was very, very frustrating. I think the Citizens United decision gave immense political weaponry to the fossil fuel industry, which they brought instantly to bear to shut down all that bipartisanship. And to my frustration, the Obama administration walked away from the cap-and-trade bill, told the Senate to not even do an empty bill that could have gotten us into conference to see what could have been done bipartisan, walked away. And you couldn't get the White House to put the words climate and change in the same paragraph.

WHITEHOUSE: And so, deeply frustrated, I started making these weekly speeches. I told my staff, look. If you guys - if I have to do this without you scheduling me regularly, then it'll always fall off the table. So every single damned week that the Senate's in session, I'm going to give a speech on climate, so get me out there. And so we're - I'm coming up on number 250. I wish I'd been able to stop at 150, but - or 50. But the fundamental problem, I think, remains - that there's a very powerful industry that doesn't want this to happen.

WHITEHOUSE: Now, the good news is that at the top, that industry has changed its position. If you look at what the CEOs say, they know it's a problem. They know their product is causing it. And they know that a carbon price is the best, most efficient and effective solution. The problem is that that word hasn't gotten down to all of the different groups that they have propped up over the years to do their business.

WHITEHOUSE: So there's a bit of a lag between what the CEOs say and what the tentacle tips of the beast are still doing. And I don't know if this is - you remember the movie "Fantasia"? Got to be a certain age to remember the movie "Fantasia." It was an early Disney cartoon in which, in one part of it, Mickey Mouse puts on the wizard hat and gets the brooms to do his work for him, except that the brooms keep replicating, and he can't stop them. And pretty soon, the whole castle is a wash, and the brooms have kind of taken over. And the whole thing has gone really bad.

WHITEHOUSE: And, sometimes, I wonder if the fossil fuel industry might have lost its grip on its - the groups that it had out there and how - they've got to figure out how to reel them back because at the moment, the message in Congress from all the industry groups is still, don't you dare. Don't you dare.

MEAD: Yeah.

WHITEHOUSE: But I think it's changing very quickly. And I think conceivably, even in this - under this president, you could get something done.

MEAD: Well, you tell me the Trump family's position on climate change hasn't always been...

WHITEHOUSE: No.

MEAD: ...What it appears to be now.

WHITEHOUSE: No. They took out a full-page ad in The New York Times in 2009, saying that the science of climate change was - to use their word in the advertisement - incontrovertible and that the consequences of failing to act on climate change would be - to use their words - catastrophic and irreversible. So I just need 2009 Trump back, and we're good to go.

MEAD: I actually think that, you know, you're one of the people in Congress that has been very supportive of nuclear industry as part of a climate change strategy. And, sometimes, I think that's - climate change gets caught up in culture wars in...

WHITEHOUSE: Yeah.

MEAD: ...An interesting way so that people who are - you know, who are skeptical about the climate movement will say, you know, you say this is an emergency. It's going to destroy life on Earth. We've got to sacrifice everything to make it stop. But you won't have a single nuclear power plant...

WHITEHOUSE: Yeah.

MEAD: ...Even though it's zero emissions. And that has the effect of making skeptics more skeptical. They think, you don't really believe what you're saying...

WHITEHOUSE: No.

MEAD: ...Or you would have a different position on nuclear.

WHITEHOUSE: Well, two things are frustrating in this space. One is that nuclear technology has moved forward a ton since the big light-water reactors of the '50s and '60s. And there's a lot of really fascinating engineering and design and research happening. And there's a prospect not only of having very safe, modular but also new-generation nuclear facilities that could actually burn through our existing nuclear waste stockpile. We have no operative plan for our nuclear waste stockpile. If we were U.S. Incorporated, that would be a huge liability on our balance sheet. And management would say, yipes - we've got to pay attention to that huge liability on our balance sheet if it's X. But is that liability X minus one - we will pay to solve this problem?

MEAD: Right.

WHITEHOUSE: And you do something about it. Instead, it sits, and it sits, and it sits, and it grows. And it's still on the sites where the plants are, and we have no plan for it. So the potential for a generation of nuclear power facilities that can actually repurpose that as fuel is something that ought to be like a Manhattan Project.

WHITEHOUSE: The second thing is the stupid economics of closing down safely operating nuclear plants in order to build a gas plant when the economic justification for that move entirely depends on there being no value to carbon-free power when everybody knows that is not the case. Frankly, we just had a bill pass the Senate - I want to say unanimously - that put a price on carbon in a positive way by rewarding carbon capture and sequestration at 25 or 50 bucks per ton.

WHITEHOUSE: So we're over the hump of, is there value to nonpolluting power? And it's that failure to recognize that value that is the excuse for closing a nuclear plant to open a gas plant. And at some point, fake economics lead to dumb decisions. And that's - so that's been very frustrating. Why would you do that when those aren't the real economics of it? But the poor, old nuclear companies have to live in the - you know, real world, not the ideal world. And if that's where they have to go, that's where they have to go. A couple of states have stood up to try to head that off. We should at the federal level.

MEAD: One factor in the thinking of some has been that fracking has now unlocked these immense U.S. resources in fossil fuels and that this is adding economic power. It's adding geopolitical power. It's a way of frustrating Putin in various ways, of gaining influence with China, Japan. So how do you pull together the sort of fracking opportunity with the climate problems? And where do you think we should be going on this?

WHITEHOUSE: Well, if you do things that ought to be noncontroversial, like put a price on carbon so that the market is where the truth is, then you can let the market kind of take care of that. And to the extent that there is value to getting the natural gas out there, great. It will pay. There will be funds to offset that to reduce - to capture the carbon, to do direct air capture, to do all sorts of things. Solutions become economically viable once there's a price on carbon. And I think at that point, the market system balances itself out.

WHITEHOUSE: The second thing you need is real information. And the problem with natural gas is that while it is better than coal at the burner tip, there's an awful lot of piping between where it comes out of the ground and the burner tip. And when it leaks out of that piping, it's methane, and it's a much more powerful greenhouse gas. So we need to quantify what that actually is both to make sure that we're charging the right price on carbon and so the industry can be responsible about fixing the valves and tightening the pipes and reducing that problem, which is something that they should be doing. But I think that - you know, I'm with a market solution on this, and I think an adequate price on carbon does a lot as long as the information is there.

MEAD: Another thing about the work that you do in the Senate that I find interesting is the work on oceanic pollution and where, again, you know, even in this current climate, you've been able to get a bipartisan group working on some of this.

WHITEHOUSE: That has been great. It's been one of my favorite moments in the Senate. If you don't mind me telling a little story about Jim Inhofe - because Jim and I are polar adversaries. I've written op-eds against him in his home-state papers.

MEAD: (Laughter).

WHITEHOUSE: You know, we are at war on the subject of fossil fuel and climate change. And Dan Sullivan, my wonderful Republican compadre in the ocean plastics, arranged to have a hearing in the Environment and Public Works Committee on this subject. It was going great. We never have great environmental hearings on the Environment and Public Works Committee, and this one is going great. I'm so happy. And the Republicans are saying nice things, and the witnesses are all in agreement. And then Jim Inhofe walks in. And I thought to myself, Jim, how could you? You're from a square state. You don't even have a coast. Why are you coming here to ruin my day?

WHITEHOUSE: And what this is is a story about prejudice because, in fact, Jim came in. He sat down. He listened to the witnesses. When it came time for his turn, he asked great questions. And at the end, he said, you know, when you guys get your bill finalized, I think I'd like to be an original co-sponsor. As a young man, he had gone down to the Texas coast and helped protect the little sea turtles coming out of their shells and going down to the ocean from people driving up and down the beach.

WHITEHOUSE: And when Jim Inhofe is on your side, he is one of the most powerful and effective legislators in this town. And because of him, we got that bill passed. We got it passed by unanimous consent. When you have a Sheldon Whitehouse-Jim Inhofe bill, I think everybody in the Senate knows that there's room in the middle for you.

(LAUGHTER)

WHITEHOUSE: And now, because of Dan's enthusiasm for this - Dan Sullivan - we are out with Save Our Seas 2.0. The day the bill passed, Dan came up to me said, that was so great. Let's do a bigger, better one. Boom - you're in. Let's do it. And we did. So this has been a really happy story of improbable alliances, unanimous consents and now some really consequential stuff starting to happen for good.

MEAD: And what shape are the seas in? Is this going to work, or does there need to be a 3.0 and...

WHITEHOUSE: No, we're going to have to keep going. I mean, the plastic thing I think we can deal with. There are 10 rivers and five countries that are responsible...

MEAD: The Yangtze's...

WHITEHOUSE: ...For most of this.

MEAD: ...Responsible for some huge percentage.

WHITEHOUSE: Ton of it - Vietnam, China, Philippines, Indonesia and India, I think, are the big five. And there are 10 rivers - eight in Asia and two in Africa. So it's a very solvable problem. A great deal of it simply has to do with really bad upland waste management infrastructure in those countries. So, I mean, it's a really strong trade issue to say, why would we trade with you when you're dumping all your trash into the oceans, and our companies have to pay to treat it properly? So I think there really are solutions here, and we really can go with that. The larger problem is going to be the climate impacts. The oceans are warming at a rate of four Hiroshima-style nuclear devices' worth of energy per second - per second. That's a lot of heat energy going into the oceans. And 30% of the excess carbon dioxide that we've released actually gets chemically absorbed by the oceans. And then they react by turning acidic, which is why you had aquaculture operations in the Northwest die - because the little larval clams and mussels could never form shells in the acidified water.

WHITEHOUSE: So we're seeing those problems of heat, sea level rise and acidification that are - solving them is dependent on solving the climate and emissions problem. So the plastics is going to be easier. But plastics is also an opportunity for teamwork and trust and collegiality to develop that can help with the larger problem.

MEAD: Right. Well, I've got some questions from the audience. But before I get to that, we have a lot of interns and students and young people associated with Hudson. So do you have any advice for young people who want to have useful careers in public service? What should they be doing to prepare themselves intellectually, professionally? Just what would you advise?

WHITEHOUSE: A, do it. It's really rewarding - frustrating as hell sometimes but rewarding. Plus, this is the United States of America. We are different, exceptional and special in my view. And to be a part of that is to dedicate yourself to a cause that matters. So doubly, do it. Read, read, read, I think is really good advice.

WHITEHOUSE: And listen, listen, listen. And don't think that some task or some role is too - is not grand enough for you. Start at the city council. Start working for a state representative. Start wherever. And then when you're doing what you're doing, distinguish yourself by working hard, being honorable and showing up on time. And if you can do, like, simple tasks like that and persist at it, people notice. And next thing you know, you're asked to do something more important. And then you do that again, and next thing you know, you're asked to do something more important. It gets very rewarding very quickly.

MEAD: All right. Let's go to the audience here. I've got one on China. With China investing heavily in Latin America and in their new Silk Road, how can the U.S. prevent China from acquiring more international influence as long as China is investing in these projects?

WHITEHOUSE: That's a really good question. And I don't know that there's a single answer. I grew up in the era of "The Ugly American." And "The Ugly American" book was about the theory that when Americans went around and thought they were being so grand, they were actually very often insensitive, very often vulgar, very often, you know, inappropriate with respect to the countries that they were in. And very often, the good things that we thought we were doing were backfiring because

of our lack of sophistication or local knowledge or whatever. And I think the Chinese are probably going to bump into a good deal of that. So I don't think we have to go into a mad panic over it.

WHITEHOUSE: I do think that making sure that we are present in these places - I think that isolationism would be a very, very poor response to this. I think that damaging our brand would be a very poor response to this because when the chips are down, in my view, people of good will around the world will default to the United States of America every single time because they respect our values. And we can lose some because the deal is so close that it's not like a default proposition. It's like - but I do think that on balance, day in and day out, having a brand that speaks to people around the world that we're about honest democracy - we're about fair markets, and we're about opportunity for everybody - then it's kind of hard to top that. But we've got to be there to make that point.

MEAD: I think - looking at the question, I think she would follow up, our questioner, with, well, does this mean - should the U.S. be having its own version of a Silk Road initiative or be doing more to promote economic development?

WHITEHOUSE: No, I don't...

MEAD: Or are we OK as we are?

WHITEHOUSE: I think we're probably OK as we are. I do think that as the climate problems start to hit home really hard in some of these much poorer countries, and herding and agriculture and fisheries and basic means of livelihood for people who are very close to the Earth start to get compromised, it's going to be really important for us to be there, so we're not losing the battle of you spoiled, rich, first-world robbers have now done this to me, to my farm, to my country, and you're not even here to help. And you knew it, and you didn't do anything about it anyway. And I don't want to hear about it from you. I'm going to go with the Chinese or the Russians or the jihadis or somebody else.

WHITEHOUSE: So I think being there to pay attention and help with the science and help with the coastal issues and help with the agricultural issues and help with water supply issues and make sure that we are there trying to help solve problems that we've helped cause - that's going to be a very important piece of brand protection.

MEAD: OK. All right. We have, Turkey has posed new threats. Its purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia threatens NATO. The Turkish military has been massing at the Turkey-Syria frontier, threatening the people of northeast Syria and U.S. military personnel. How should the U.S. respond to these threats from Turkey?

WHITEHOUSE: Well, I think with respect to the purchase of the anti-aircraft weapons, the Armed Services Committee and the Department of Defense are going to do a pretty good job of protecting themselves there. With respect to the various threats, I think it's time to take a slightly stronger line. We've always backed off, even letting the Armenian Genocide resolution to go forward because we need their airbases. And I think that some of the problems in Syria are being exacerbated there.

WHITEHOUSE: I've been a big fan of the Kurds. I think the Kurdish effort in the Middle East in our wars was incredibly helpful. The northern part of Iraq was kept more or less safe because of extremely brave Kurdish fighters who were unbelievably effective per pound of hardware that they required. And I think that panics the Turks because of their Kurdish population. But if we start letting ourselves get rolled by countries like Turkey - I think Erdogan's a pretty dangerous guy. We've got to be very careful there. That's about as far as I'll go.

MEAD: OK. You think Turkey has a future as a member of NATO?

WHITEHOUSE: It's busily degrading it.

MEAD: OK. I have another question that is hemispheric. What do you think of the chaotic situation in Venezuela? Can it continue? What should the U.S. be doing there?

WHITEHOUSE: Boy, you guys ask good questions - tough ones.

MEAD: I know. I - this is why I save the audience...

WHITEHOUSE: Yeah.

MEAD: ...Ones for the last. These are...

WHITEHOUSE: It's both sad and pathetic to see a country that had been a model of wealth and democracy and good market systems and quality of life, as Venezuela was, devolve into the nightmare that it now is. And I don't - I'm not expert in all the things that took us there, but I do think that it's a living example of how when you let corruption get out of hand, the country can just turn toxic and collapse. And once it turns toxic, it now can infect its neighbors and ultimately, even the hemisphere.

WHITEHOUSE: So a heightened concern about the toxicity of corruption, even in countries that we don't immediately care about necessarily - everywhere, I think, needs to be American policy. I think corruption anywhere is a hazard to our country and our model and, particularly, back to my original point, where we are the aiders and abettors of it, it's even worse. But I'd put corruption at the heart of what has gone wrong there.

MEAD: OK. And do we - would you say we should sit back and await events there? Is there is some - what policy is there that - at this point? Because you have millions of refugees...

WHITEHOUSE: Yeah. No, it's a mess, and it's a nightmare. I doubt there's much that we could do helpful, unilaterally. I think that it's part of a Pan-American coalition that tried to put a solution together that could be quite helpful - harder to pull that Pan-American solution together, given some of the behavior we've exhibited. But I think that - I think the recent experience has been that America best projects its power through alliances and through the organization of world opinion and world power in alignment with our interests.

MEAD: There's finally also a lot of talk now about the southern border, where you're seeing people-smuggling. You're seeing arms trade - illicit arms trade, drugs mixing with some of this dark money that's

flowing through the international system. There's some evidence that foreign governments are trying to use this to their advantage. What do we do about our border?

WHITEHOUSE: I want to go back to the bipartisan Senate immigration bill. I think that the president had a big, big opportunity to take that bipartisan bill and use it as a launch point for a comprehensive solution. And as you know, in that first televised meeting, he said very clearly, I want a big, bipartisan, comprehensive solution. We'll solve DACA if you want, but I really want a big solution. And then, I think, some people who were not giving him good advice unwound that. And a number of colleagues who'd gone out on a limb to try to help him provide that ended up getting cut off at the knees.

WHITEHOUSE: It's always tough to be cut off at the knees by the president of your own party. So that kind of diminished enthusiasm for continuing to work on that problem. And, you know, there are times when you can take an important public issue, and you can do everything in your power to turn it to your party's advantage and to have it be rhetorically powerful. But that doesn't always contribute to finding a solution, particularly if you need a bipartisan solution.

WHITEHOUSE: So I think we're in a difficult place right now because this has become as much part of the culture wars as anything else. But it was heartbreaking. We were really, really close. That bill that came out of the Senate in such bipartisan fashion, I think, should have had a hearing in the House, would've passed the House. And, regrettably, the White House - a Democratic White House at the time - didn't put any pressure on to make that happen. There are provisions of the Constitution that allow the president to call the Congress or either House thereof back into session.

WHITEHOUSE: I think that with the Senate bill sitting there through that long, hot summer, if President Obama had called the House back over and over again, forced that issue on them, made them do something or really visibly walk away from a bipartisan compromise that had come out of the Senate, it would've been very significant and probably politically smart too. But it's one of those might-have-beens.

MEAD: Right. You got any ideas for what we should do now that - I mean, do we go back to that bill? Do we...

WHITEHOUSE: I think that, to me, would be the launch point. That, to me, would be the launch point. We'll need to have a better sense of where the additional money that we have sent down there has been spent. There clearly is a humanitarian nightmare happening down there that is a real blot on our country right now. And we need to have the resources there to take care of the kids, to stop the family separation and do all those things.

WHITEHOUSE: But, fundamentally, at the heart of this is the fact that we're still divided on this issue. And I think the extent of that bipartisan compromise gives us a launch point to kind of close the deal for once and for all. But it's going to be hard to recruit Republicans to that cause because the last time the president recruited them, he cut their knees off a few weeks later. That's not a great track record.

MEAD: Listen...

WHITEHOUSE: We may be slow learners in the Senate, but we learn.

MEAD: (Laughter) Well, Sheldon, thank you for coming. Again, anytime we can be of help to you from Hudson, let us know. I don't say this as a Wall Street Journal columnist but as a Hudson fellow. And it is really great to see this kind of leadership in Congress. Thank you for coming.

WHITEHOUSE: Well, I'm grateful for the opportunity, and I'm particularly grateful for Hudson's leadership in this kleptocracy space. This is as big a national - a long-term national security issue as we have, and you are leading on it. And I'm grateful. Thank you.

MEAD: Well, thank you. And let me remind you he needs to go, so...