Transcript: Explaining America with Richard Haass

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NTI: STEAD-SELLERS: Hello, and welcome to Washington Post Live. I'M Frances Stead Sellers, a senior writer here at The Post.

Today we're going to take another step towards explaining America with Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass, who is the author of a new book titled "The Opt-Out Generation: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens."

Richard Haass, a very warm welcome to Washington Post Live.

DR. HAASS: Well, thank you so this not so warm day here in New York.

NTI: STEAD-SELLERS: [Laughs] Hello from Washington, where I am now.

Richard, I wanted to start by asking you, you have devoted your career to foreign policy, and yet in this book, you turn your focus decidedly inward. You say that the greatest threat to the U.S. comes not from China or from Russia but from within. How so, and why did you feel a need to write this now?

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DR. HAASS: We tend not to think of what goes on here as national security, but it essentially is, and when I'll be asking—ask questions of people, I'll say, what's the biggest threat to the United States? Is it a nuclear exchange? Is it Iran or climate change or financial bad debt? Anyway, those things are of great concern, but history suggests if we are, more or less, unfazed here at home, then we have a better chance of meeting those external challenges. But if we're distracted, we're divided, we're not—we don't have the bandwidth to do what we need to do. We have the bandwidth or the cohesion to meet those challenges, so we're going to be able to meet our domestic problems to deal with those, but we're going to be able to do so in such a way that anyone in the rest of the world would want to emulate, so way we could reassure our friends, so way we could deter our foes. And so, I think the quality of democracy here ranks at the top of the list of our national security concerns.

NTI: STEAD-SELLERS: So "The Art of Citizenship" obviously plays off of "The Art of the Deal," and you talk a little bit about why a digital based society is so pathbreaking. Tell us about that.

DR. HAASS: Well, look, rights are obviously fundamental to the American experiment. The Bill of Rights, Frances, which you—I assume you teach and know, it's the first amendment, it's second amendment—constitutional their willingness to ratify the proposed Constitution on the acceptance of a Bill of Rights that limited the power of the federal government.

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My view is that, as important as rights are, they're not enough, and don't get me wrong. I will believe that rights extends, to borrow from Abraham Lincoln, the—the—the—

DR. HAASS: You're absolutely right, and what we're seeing is education being, at best, politicized. You might also say weaponized in some cases. I think it obviously matters deeply.

I've thought about it a lot. I actually got involved in Northern Ireland, where you had two religious traditions at odds, and we say, with one another, unable to talk about, much less study, their past. We're not the only country that has these kinds of splits.

My own view is that what one has to do is separate almost a spine, a line of what happened, which is factual. Here are the documents. Here are the basic events and so forth. And then one can have various interpretations, legitimate, important but differing interpretations of what caused certain events or the consequences of certain events. And I think that's what one has to do.

We have to avoid having--trying to impose a singular or simple view of history as a framing or as a--as an explanation of all. I think we have to--again, we--to go back to what Daniel Patrick Moynihan said, everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion but not to his or her own set of facts. So I think we need to have a common set of facts about American history, and then, yes, we can have different analyses and opinions about them. And that's where--I could imagine having classes built around model Congresses or Supreme Courts, debates and legislatures and the like. I think that would be a great experience for young people.

MS. STEAD SELLERS: Richard, you've talked about getting information from different sources. I want to read to you a tweet that you made about Fox News. The first amendment you wrote, which prohibits Congress making a law, a bridging freedom of the press, is fundamental to American democracy. With that comes an obligation to the press to act responsibly. Shame on Fox News for putting profit before our democracy. And this was about Fox knowingly lying to its audience. Shame. Is that enough?

DR. HAASS: Well, I would say it's not enough, but it's a start. As I said before, I would love to see corporations, as citizens, thinking twice before putting advertising on Fox.

You know, it's interesting. We've had such a debate in this country about things like ESG, sustainability in corporations, about DEI, diversity, equity, inclusion, and so forth. Why aren't we having a debate about what corporations should be doing for democracy? As I said, let people vote, not contributing directly to candidates who are undermining democracy, not contributing directly to media outlets that are undermining democracy. I think that would get people's attention. If Fox is going to be motivated by profit, then go to the--then go attack that. Go essentially attack what their priority is, and I think that would be meaningful.

MS. STEAD SELLERS: Richard, we've had some input from our audience, and I'd like to read to you a question that comes from Barbara Taylor from Oregon, and Barbara Taylor says, in your view, how and where does the right of free speech intersect with the need to prevent the use of a social media platform or any entity that disseminates, quotes, "news" from influencing democratic processes through disinformation?

DR. HAASS: Barbara, that is a tough, tough question. The Supreme Court took two days of oral arguments last month to begin to deal with it. There are going to be some very big rulings, I would think, in a few months, probably in June, dealing with this about whether social media, whether the people who provide the pipes, the infrastructure, ought to bear any responsibility for the content.

I am conflicted on this. There's all sorts of content I would prefer not to be out there, but I think drawing lines is going to be extraordinarily difficult. The idea that we're going to anoint a bunch of, say, young people working at one of these companies to make all sorts of decisions about what is legitimate free speech and what is not--I don't know about you. It makes me extraordinarily uncomfortable.

So my own view is to expect the Twitters, the Facebooks, and the rest to exercise the kind of regulatory role we would like as a real reach. I'm not sure they're able to do it, given the volume. In that sense, they are very different from The Washington Post or New York Times or a radio or television station.

I then kind of fall back more on the consumers, and that's why I think courses, mandatory courses in information literacy in schools, could make a big difference. So my guess is it's going to take probably a mix of some slightly greater regulation or oversight, slightly more pressure on the companies to draw some lines, but also I think it's really going to be upon us, the consumers, to understand what it is we're watching or reading or hearing and showing greater discrimination.

MS. STEAD SELLERS: Richard, I'm not going to get through all your obligations, but the second one is get involved. One way would to have--would be to have everybody vote. What is your view on compulsory voting?

DR. HAASS: Americans have a visceral dislike of things that are compulsory. You know that, and I do. Australia, you technically don't have to vote. You'd have to show up at the voting booth, and then you can foul your ballot. But I don't think that would go down well here. I think anything that's mandatory or compulsory here, that will become the debate rather than the issue of voting. So I think it would be much wiser to have a conversation about how do we incentivize voting. I've got a--probably a controversial proposal that I would--you know, the right is always about voter identification. The left is about the ease of voting. Why not have a compromise? Why not basically start a conversation? If we were to have voter identification but have far more--you know give vote--make voting day a day off from work, extend the hours and so forth, basically increase the ease of voting dramatically, at the same time, we increase the confidence in the--in the voters, I think that might be a compromise worth exploring.

MS. STEAD SELLERS: Compromise is such an interesting thing. It's your third obligation, of course, and I want to ask you very directly about this very divided Congress we've had. We have had some joint decisions, though, over infrastructure and chips. How optimistic are you looking about that that kind of bipartisanship could help?

DR. HAASS: We've had quite a bit recently. You mentioned some of the infrastructure and chips. We had it on the reform of the so-called "Electoral Count Act of 1887." It might have been the single most important thing Congress did to protect American democracy that nobody noticed, and I think we'll notice it possibly in 2024 when we go through the process of what nearly led to--or did lead to an attempted insurrection on January 6th.

We had some mild bipartisanship on gun control legislation. We actually have quite a bit so far of bipartisanship on aid to Ukraine, on a tough policy towards China, opposition to trade. So we actually have a little bit more bipartisanship than I would have thought.

We obviously, though, don't have it on some really big issues like the border, on immigration policy. I think it's going to be hard. The next big test will probably be the debt ceiling, and I hope we have it. I pray we have it. We've got enough economic problems without a reckless and irresponsible use of the debt ceiling vote.

So I think it's really up to Republicans to adopt what's my tenth obligation, which is to put the country before party or person, and there's no reason--

MS. STEAD SELLERS: Right.

DR. HAASS: --to go against the debt ceiling.

MS. STEAD SELLERS: So in Maryland, Governor Wes Moore, our new governor, recently suggested that a year of service would be a good--might be a good option for high schoolers. Where do you stand on national service or a year of service in order to bring together this kind of sense of working together for the country?

DR. HAASS: I love it. California has many programs in place. I know Wes Moore is thinking of it in Maryland. It would get at what we were talking about a few minutes ago, Frances, this idea of the separate pots. It would actually give some people from different parts of the country a chance to meet. It would give people some good training, some good life experience. They'd make some money doing it. Then you could have a situation where businesses would hire them in the same way that they now hire vets, or colleges might give them a leg up in admissions. So I think it would be a great thing for these individuals, and I think it would be a really good thing for the country. And it would begin to break down some of the divide that any time you're doing something with the government, there's something wrong with that. So I think it'd be a win-win across the board.

MS. STEAD SELLERS: I have lots more questions I want to ask you. I'm going to have to restrict myself to one or perhaps two more, but Liz Cheney, she was putting country before her own position. Has that--has her loss had a chilling effect on this notion of putting country first?

DR. HAASS: Well, she's a great example of it. If JFK were around writing "Profiles and Courage," Liz Cheney would get a chapter, so would some of those secretaries of state who certified electoral outcomes, even though it went against their party. Those are all courageous principled stands.

But let's see. Let's see how history plays out. Yes, Liz Cheney has paid a price in the short run. My hunch is we haven't seen the last of Liz Cheney on the national stage. There's also lots of ways to make a difference in this country by not holding elected office. So my guess is, yes, she paid a short-term price, but in the medium and the long term, I would not count her out.

MS. STEAD SELLERS: Okay. Last question. It has to be answered in a sentence, I'm afraid, but you've been president of the Council for 20 years. You've about to step down. What's your single biggest lesson from that 20-year period?

DR. HAASS: That ideas matter and people matter, that there's nothing that's inevitable or baked into the cake, but history in some ways is what we all make it to be. And on an optimistic day, it makes me feel positive about what could happen, and on a cloudy day, it makes me worried about what might happen.

MS. STEAD SELLERS: Ideas matter. People matter. Richard Haass, thank you very much for making all those things matter on Washington Post Live.

DR. HAASS: Thank you so much, Frances.

MS. STEAD SELLERS: And thank you to our viewers for joining us today. As you know, you can find other programming at WashingtonPostLive.com. That's WashingtonPostLive.com.

I'm Frances Stead Sellers. Thank you for joining us.

[End recorded session]

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