



Library podcast

Ben Rhodes Discusses 'The World As It Is'

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[00:00:36] Thanks so much for being here tonight. I'm Stacia Brandon I'm the literature and humanities program manager here at the Seattle Public Library. As we begin this evening I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered here on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. We would like to honor their elders past and present and we thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome. Thanks. Welcome to this evening's event with Ben Rhodes and Flora Angela Dávila presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. Thank you to our authors series sponsored Gary Kunis and to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. Finally we are also grateful to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped the library provide free programs and services that touched the lives of everyone in our community. So the library foundation donors here with us tonight we say thank you very much for your support. And now. Another round of applause for sir. Now without further ado I'd like to welcome Karen to Olman from Elliott Bay Book Company who will introduce our speakers so well I can't think of a better time to host Ben Rhodes and I can't think of a better place.

[00:02:00] So thank you so much for turning out tonight. So tonight we welcome Ben Rhodes former presidential speechwriter and deputy national security adviser to Barack Obama. His political engagement began significantly at least on the national scene after he witnessed some of the events of September 11th. After working for former Indiana Congressman Lee Hamilton vice chairman of the 9/11 Commission Mr. Rhodes joined the Obama campaign for eight years. He served in a variety of capacities within the Obama White House and that is really the heart of the story that he tells. In his memoir *The World As It Is* A Memoir of the Obama White House this is a thoughtful well told and humble account about a historic presidency and about what it was like to work in. As part of a White House team during some pretty turbulent times including the Arab Spring normalization of relations with Cuba the Iran deal and the election of Donald Trump so very very very different times. And what a wonderful bittersweet pleasure it was to read this book. And I hope that you all too. So he appears tonight in conversation with a PLUR Angela Dávila the managing editor at the award winning cross-cut dot com which is a wonderful local news blog.

[00:03:26] They won some Seattle the Society of Professional journalism kudos the other night. And that's a great way to find out what's happening in our community. And so I encourage you to go there. She's a managing editor now at cross-cut but she's also a veteran Seattle journalist and she worked for about 14 years for the Seattle Times as a staff reporter covering race immigration and features. And you've also heard her reporting on k and k accept them and read her work in Seattle Magazine and she's appeared on many stages around the city including for Tara's annual Ampersand life. And at the local cross-cut festival so. Fleur Angela and Ben will have a conversation at the front. Then there will be time for questions. As we said as a session said a few minutes ago. We continue to sell books the Bay Book Company table and they are precise. But if you'd like to get a book personalized or sale on the signing line we will have some time for that. So with that please welcome Ben Rhodes and Florencia Dávila to the Seattle Public Library stage

[00:04:44] There are some interesting things that happened in the news today.

[00:04:49] What would a typical day be like when you were in the White House.

[00:04:56] Unlike any day of the Trump administration. Actually that is one of the strange things to watch as a typical day for me would be I would wake up and immediately I'd have an avalanche of e-mails that have come in overnight and sometimes I'd be woken up in the middle of the night.

[00:05:16] The Situation Room the White House situation would call you and wake you up if some awful event happened around the world. I'd get to work around 8:00. I would get the presidential daily briefing which is the daily intelligence briefing that goes to the United States. They would give it to me first. So someone come to my office and walk me through kind of the worst things that are happening in the world because that's what they present to you. And then I would go to a meeting with President Obama and his senior national security team to go over that presidential daily briefing.

[00:05:50] Then I would spend the next couple of hours generally helping prepare our spokespeople to answer questions and their briefings of the White House press secretary the State Department spokesperson.

[00:06:03] How are we responding to and commenting on events from around the world usually then my afternoons would be filled with meetings about developing policies. And so what would be called the deputies committee the people at the deputy level at the State Department the National Grid council where I was Defense Department and others would meet to discuss the Iran nuclear negotiations or the Paris climate agreement or terrorism issues. And we were making recommendations that would go up to the cabinet and ultimately ultimately the president. And then I would tend to have meetings at the end of the day about whatever the upcoming priority for the president was. The next foreign trip he had the next major speech had to give the next major policy we had to announce. So that was the basic rhythm but a crisis could easily blow all that up and you could spend the whole day focused on something that you didn't expect to be focused on. And obviously that that is a marked contrast.

[00:07:02] The absence of any rhythm and routine that I see today the the book has been described as sort of a coming of age story. This journey from sort of this idealistic person that you were I think in your 20s and moving forward to sort of the reality of what politics is like early on you talk about hearing the convention speech and hoping that he would run for president. And then quickly saying something that you were looking for a hero and I'm wondering. Tell us a little bit about the idealism and sort of the thought what you thought you were going into and how quickly that change.

[00:07:42] Well one of the opportunities that I realized I had in writing this book is that most people who write these types of memoirs when they came into these jobs were already established public figures. You know Hillary Clinton or Leon Panetta or and I had the experience of being 29 years old when I went to work for Barack Obama. And so I was relatively anonymous. And so I could bring the reader into what it felt like to go from that to how I emerged on that there and in that particular passage you know what I was referring to is I kind of begin the book in my journey on 9/11 you know where I was 24 years old and I thought my life was going to move in a particular direction. I was interested in writing and publishing and I was living in New York City. And I watched those attacks I watched the second plane hit the World Trade Center I watched the first tower fall and I knew then that I wanted whatever I did to be about the next chapter.

[00:08:44] How did we respond to that as a nation. I actually went to an Army recruiter who didn't know what to make of me. I was a fiction writing graduate student teaching community college. And he kind of looked at me and couldn't really fit in. You know where if he had made a better pitch this all could have been very different. But I went to Washington and got this shot for Lee Hamilton and I worked on some very important things like the 9/11 Commission. But what I meant about a hero is 9/11 had kind of changed my life and I think to my generation was this kind of transformation. Missional then and I never felt like the politicians matched the moment.

[00:09:26] In other words you know I'm watching these huge historic events that are reshaping our world. And I didn't feel like anybody in politics was speaking a language that resonated with me or that I couldn't connect with. I certainly didn't like the decisions that the Bush administration had made. And then I saw Barack Obama who was different and he was right about the Iraq war and he spoke in ways that I understood and he was trying to kind of stir in people a sense of common good and common humanity that kind of echoed my parents heroes the Kennedys and I wanted to be a part of that. And I didn't know exactly where that would lead and I didn't even know I would not have said it when I went to work from him. You know I'm going to be the deputy U.S. security adviser. I just wanted to help this man get elected president part of your job.

[00:10:19] Early on was writing speeches and I'm wondering how do you go about capturing his voice.

[00:10:25] How do you what is it that he says How do you translate what he tells you. In two words that that will be authentic to him. And how do you balance constantly calculating what he wants to say versus what you want him to say versus how you think the public is going to hear what is being said.

[00:10:48] Well you learn pretty fast that it's not about what you want to say. Nobody is particularly interested in what the speechwriter wants to say. I

[00:10:58] First of all it's not about writing a good speech it's about writing a speech in the voice of the person delivering it. You have to get inside their head and you have to know what their worldview is how they talk what is going to bring out their best as an order. And so when I got this job as a speechwriter I reread his books and he was quite personal in his in his particularly first book and his world view is very accessible there. And then I went and I reread all the. We had a file of every interview that he gave and I would read those interviews to to get his speaking mannerisms down and then he cared a lot about his speeches and so if he was giving a big speech in particular he would sit with you for an hour and literally walk you through the outline of what he wanted to say. And the good thing about Barack Obama is the reason I think he was successful as a politician is he was authentic. You know the 2004 convention speech that drew me to politics and that inspired me was the exact same speech as his farewell address in 2017 and you can't say that about many American politicians. If any that message doesn't change. And once we had that down right you know. You're telling one story and each speeches a part of this bigger story. And I remember trying to explain this to somebody I worked on the speech you gave in the 2008 campaign that the Yes We Can speech that you know became a music video and all of us.

[00:12:30] And I remember telling some oh yeah I worked on that speech and they were almost like disappointed that there were any speechwriters who worked on the speech. And I said look it's not the speechwriter because closed your eyes and I'm going to say this with a lot of respect for the people about to name but to make a different point. McClure's rise in pictures like John Kerry or Hillary Clinton giving that speech. They couldn't. It's not the writing. It's a that was authentic coming from him. And so that's what I had to capture. And very quickly to to answer your question I realize it fully answers where I began to lose some idealism is we caught this kind of lightning in the bottle and the oil campaign and it did feel like the country was coming together and we were at this transformative moment. And you know the first inclination I had was was all the way back the campaign that the more he succeeded the more angry it seemed to make certain people in the United States. The strangest thing about Barack Obama is what he could do that drove the opposition the most crazy is when he didn't fall on his face.

[00:13:38] And I think a lot of that had to do with race. I think when suddenly there was an African-American who can play the role of the United States and played better frankly than most people who had that office that was very threatening to some people.

[00:13:53] That makes me think of talking about race and this I think it's deep in the book when you have that make this revelation of sort of the pressures and how the experiences that he had in trying to navigate who he was privately and who he was publicly. And I'm wondering and you talk very openly directly as a white man sort of what you saw and was wondering if you could tell a little bit of a story about in that moment of that.

[00:14:23] Yeah.

[00:14:24] Well you know I guess the story I would tell is is I had this unusual experience of having to tell Barack Obama that Nelson Mandela had died. You know his hero. And I kind of used that to tell a broader story about how we dealt with race in the White House the probably not honestly not intentional pun I uses it. Racism was kind of like white noise in the White House because we all knew that it was there but we didn't talk about it very much. But it would come out in strange moments where Obama felt like he could be more candid. And I wanted through this book to let readers to hear what I heard which is be preparing for a press conference. And what you do that is you kind of go through all the questions that he's going to get. And you practice answers and so we practice you know well Mr. President do you think some of the opposition you faces because of race. And he'd say yes of course. Next question. And we knew he was going to say that it was kind of this weird catharsis he had or we'd say What do you think needs to be done to reduce the tensions around the Black Lives Matter movement and he'd say Well cops should stop shooting unarmed black kids you know. And the reason though that he did often although sometimes he did say those things is because you know he had an experience early in the Whitehouse is more important than people I think realize at the time which is in 2009 you got asked at a press conference about Henry Louis Gates the Harvard professor being arrested in his own home by a cop and Obama said Well that was stupid and it sparked this week long debate about whether Obama should have said that.

[00:16:14] And it kind of overwhelmed our agenda. We were trying to save the economy from a global depression. But people in cable television loved to argue about well did Obama just offend the police and why did you say that and we had to have this kind of hokey and retrospect kind of dumb beer summit where the cop came out a beer with and with these gates and Obama and it was kind of all dispiriting. And I think what Obama realized then is if let's say he was giving an interview about health care if he uttered a word about race no one pay any attention to his health care plan you know that the conversation that ensued was not going to be particularly mature and the experience of the Mandela speech was interesting to me is that I had this strange job as a white man writing a eulogy that Barack Obama would give for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. And I knew I wasn't really up to this. And so I kept asking him to you know put more time into this make it more personal. And when we flew on the flight to South Africa I finally got through to him like you know you got a you've got to dig into this. There's only so far I can take this speech and he rewrote huge chunks of it and made it quite personal.

[00:17:24] And he talked about the experience of being an African-American how Nelson Mandela made him want to be a better man in his own life. And he spoke in very personal terms about the imperfections of Mandela and himself.

[00:17:36] But how you know the example of Mandela led him you know kind of woke him into politics and he gives this I think one of the better speeches of his presidency and when we're flying home the lead story in the United States was the fact that the attractive blonde prime minister of Denmark had taken a selfie with Obama and here pretty historic moment the first African-American president goes and eulogizes the most important African in the 20th century. Nobody covered that. The New York Times didn't write a single story about it. And they're all running in a loop on cable television running

stories about this selfie lacking the self-awareness that if a white president had taken a selfie with a blonde woman I don't think anybody would have thought it was that interesting. And so those are the kind of moments where you would realize you know this is not as enlightened a culture as we sometimes lead ourselves to believe it is.

[00:18:39] There are such intimate moments in the book these extraordinary moments where where you're where you're seeing both Obama the politician and Obama the man Obama the father and the relationship that emerges.

[00:18:52] You start as somebody who was I think afraid to even say anything to him. And you emerge. And I think one of the last interactions of the book is one of you calls each other brother.

[00:19:06] I think that's how close you are. What struck me too or what you say you've observed is how differently he was seen and regarded whenever you traveled overseas.

[00:19:19] Yeah. And you know I tried to I mean part of the reason we became so close is I went on every one of these foreign trips and spent hundreds thousands of hours. And I try to take the reader in this book and in between meetings and car rides and hotel rooms and long flights kind of just having this running conversation and part of business. I was the only guy that didn't leave. I was there all eight years and so I had that whole context that he could play back the tape and refer to something that happened and then we'd start talking about books and movies and and I think he enjoyed the ability to just be himself with somebody on his staff. And that's how that's very much how this like relationship between us evolved into this kind of unlikely friendship.

[00:20:08] Secondly your question was to make sure I get it right.

[00:20:11] Sort of struck by how the rest of the world the rest of world.

[00:20:14] Yeah yeah so because you work I mean you were very calque. There is I think it was the Japan trip where you're talking very deliberately about how you wanted him to be seen where you wanted him to go because you knew how that would connect to.

[00:20:27] Yeah know it's a really great question because what was also very weird about working for Barack Obama is that the magic that let's say a lot of this country fell in 2008 like never went away. Around the world in 2015 and 2016 if we went somewhere it was a seismic event. You know and not just because the U.S. president because it was Barack Obama it was a minority. It was somebody from a disadvantaged background. It was someone who was a progressive and you would go to another country. Not just the Mandela funeral. If he gave a speech in that country you know you could go back there years later and people were quoting you his words like speeches that barely registered here you know and he would try to do things and we would try to do things that U.S. presidents didn't typically do. We went to Rio in Brazil. He went to a favela where they're full of Afro Brazilians who said that their own politicians didn't even go there. You know we did the same thing in Mumbai and and we always tried to connect with the culture of the place that we were going and what was very

unusual about this is that the world kind of embraced Barack Obama as this iconic American president while at home there was this toxic trivial politics that seem to have created these antibodies to reject. You know Barack Obama as this iconic president and I think some many Americans probably didn't fully appreciate how much he was appreciated around the world and how much he was changing the world's view of America at the time and that discordance was always unusual to land in a country and watch him be received again and again and again as essentially this transformational figure and then the land back in Washington and be right into the soup of whatever the most trivial partisan food fight was.

[00:22:32] So it's extraordinarily it's a little surreal to read this book now. It's surreal to write. Because constantly I remember everything every news headline just looking at the front page of the news and reading market contrast. One thing that came up recently that struck me in your book The parallels was a story about Anthony Bourdain Yeah it is very.

[00:22:58] I mean sometimes it's strange when you write something like this you don't know what the small thing is it might take on a totally different meaning. And I had actually you know I become very interested in Andy Bourdain because in part because as as the toxic nature of you know I traced in writing this how politics kind of devolved you know it was Sarah Palin and then it was the Tea Party. And then it was birtherism then it was Benghazi and then by 14 15 were in full Trump mode already. Even before Trump was running for president. That's what the Republican Party had become and Fox News has become and I started he had kind of turned off you know that element of our politics in this Anthony Bourdain show and I said a newborn so I couldn't sleep at night and I watched all these boring shows because here's a guy who's just doing a very Obama thing right he's traveling places and meeting people and trying to respect their culture and learn about them. And so I got very into the show and I was like I got to get Obama to do Anthony Bourdain and became this kind of mission of mine. And then I also saw this episode that Andy Bourdain did about Laos a country that I knew next to nothing about which is the most heavily bombed country in the world history of the world.

[00:24:17] We dropped more bombs on Laos than Germany and Japan combined. And there are there are literally 80 million unexploded ordnance you know little cluster munitions in Laos that are still killing people today. And I got that and travel the Laos to try to figure out ways that we could find more money to clean up these bombs. And ultimately this led to this. Anthony Bourdain Obama dinner in Vietnam which was you know a pretty remarkable thing. You know and I remember watching this and thinking like right off the bucket list you know. But I remember going up to Bourdain after and he looked completely stunned that that had just happened. I mean you could tell that this was a guy was like How did my life lead me to this neutral shop with Barack Obama. And I remember I went up to him and I'm like hey you know I saw your episode about Laos and now we're going to get 100 million dollars to these bombs. That started with you and he just looked at me like I was completely insane. It's like who's this guy who's talking to me. And it made it was so tragic to see him die and the way that he did it.

[00:25:26] It made the that good memory feel like even more distant in the current moment.

[00:25:33] Unfortunately given all the things that you've experienced what stands out in terms of oh my god that same stuntman being that feeling of being stunned that sort of how did I get here to where to where I am right now in this.

[00:25:49] For me at moment very much. When we went to the Vatican to tell the Vatican. So I've been leading secret negotiations with the government of Cuba for a year and a half. And with Alejandro Castro who is Raul Castro's son and we realize that we were going to make a breakthrough and we needed a third party to witness this agreement. Like I so the lawyers in the room we needed a kind of guarantor because we didn't necessarily trust each other completely. And so we enlisted the Vatican but the Vatican didn't know how far we had gone because the Vatican doesn't do any business over e-mail which in retrospect is really smart. And. So

[00:26:35] They just thought they were hosting a meeting and trying to move things along with us and so when we got there we told them we were normalizing relations.

[00:26:41] And the cardinal who was kind of the number two guy for the pope says let's have separate meetings the Cubans and the Americans because he wanted to make sure that both sides were fully on board this. And I remember I went in there and he said You guys are really normalizing relations with Cuba opening embassies and I said yes and he looked at me and he said Who are you.

[00:27:05] And I'm like I'm Ben Rhodes and he looked at me as does John Kerry know you're here. And and I explained that I could do it in secret in the way that John Kerry could and everything.

[00:27:16] But then we won this other room when you read these commandments out loud to transform this relationship and all the Vatican people had lived and worked in Latin America because you know like Pope Francis and they all had these tears in their eyes and I remember the cardinal made this very powerful speech about how this was bigger than the U.S. and Cuba that in this world that is moving in the wrong direction. So many ways that the ability for two adversaries to put the past behind them is going to be inspirational people. And I just remember sitting and thinking like I can't believe I get to do this that and when people ask me what did I miss about government.

[00:27:52] Only in the U.S. the only representing your country can you even approach a moment like that where you can do something that can change the trajectory of individual lives of countries in their own stories and so that to me I walked out of there and I was kind of thinking like well I'd have you know just done that. But but I also walked out there feeling like that was the right thing. And in government you often rarely know if your decisions are right or wrong but I knew that that was the right thing.

[00:28:24] Five minutes of our conversation when I asked these questions quickly. Did you ever think about quitting.

[00:28:29] I did. About six years in I was just burned out.

[00:28:34] And that was kind of a tough slog of a time too. You might remember that summer when there was like a bowl and it was the height of ISIS's emergence and the Russians in Ukraine and I just as like I don't think I can take two more years of this and I tried to quit a couple of times and Obama kind of ignored me.

[00:28:55] And I realize that was a really good tactic. And I actually described this amazing scene as Oval Office where he he was talking about something he was leaving. I'm like Where are you going. And he's like I've got to Baltimore for the anniversary of the writing of the Star-Spangled Banner. You do in your present. And I said I just kind of said by way of joking I've always been more of an America the Beautiful guy you know. And he said only if it's the Ray Charles version and I was like yeah you know. And I told him a story about how that song was pretty important to me that Ray Charles version after 9/11 and he said you know that should be the national anthem we should make the Ray Charles America the Beautiful the national anthem. It's got everything it's got. Race and patriotism and struggle and overcoming and I'm thinking like there's no way I'm leaving this job.

[00:29:42] I'm sitting here talking to Barack Obama about you know why Ray Charles America the Beautiful. The national anthem. So I was hooked.

[00:29:50] You are. You are married and you have two daughters and we were talking about this earlier. And I'm just wondering how old is your oldest.

[00:29:58] She's three and a half.

[00:30:00] How do you explain or does she know who Barack Obama is and how will you explain who Donald Trump is.

[00:30:07] So nobody's ever asked me so my daughter if if those of you know the photograph of Obama lying on the floor of the oval office holding a little girl up in an elephant costume that's my daughter. So she became this kind of Internet celebrity. Now she knows Obama because there's pictures of her and Obama in our house and she's met him a number of times and actually the last time I was on a trip with Obama face timing with her he goes over my shoulders like Obama you know. And so she just goes in and calls him Obama. She has no idea that he was the president or what that means. For a while we drive past the White House and she'd be like Daddy's work Daddy's work and I'd explain it and work there any more. So she doesn't know Trump is she's too young to know.

[00:30:57] I think that I would feel obligated in explaining to her who Donald Trump is if any other Republican. If Jeb Bush was president Marco Rubio I would explain this is the president and this is what the president does in our country. But just because she might consume the things that Donald Trump says I think I would have to explain to him that I don't think he's a good man and that the things you know because I wouldn't want him her to see him insulting somebody on television and think that just because he's president that means that that's the right thing to do you know. And so it's an awful thing to have to think about but I think I have to provide that context of expounder that he's

not a nice man. You know I probably have to do. He's the president that's been very important in our country. But he's also not a very nice man. He doesn't treat other people nicely in the way you would want to be treated. Because I think it's one of the things that's most troubling to me is you know kids are very impressionable. And the president is incredibly powerful and I think of the example that Obama set for kids and I'm trying to think of like what kids from more impressionable from like seven to 15 what they're consuming from Trump on Twitter and on television and how that is the example setting. It's an upsetting thing to think about.

[00:32:22] My last question before I turn it over which is given how I talked to a lot of people about tonight and what they wanted to know and repeatedly everybody said Ask him how you keep hopeful and I'm wondering given everything that you witnessed. Do you think you will ever be have that hope.

[00:32:41] Oh yes. So I end the book on this note. I thought a lot about the last year and half as you might imagine the meaning of a presidential legacy because everybody's always asking me you know don't you feel so sad that your legacy is being dismantled. But that presupposes that a legacy is kind of a score card.

[00:33:01] You know the policy achievements and diplomatic achievements. But then I thought about it and you know my hero growing up in politics you know obviously before my time but was like John F. Kennedy even I felt compelled to get into politics because of John F. Kennedy and inspired by his words and watched his speeches and when I went to work for Obama I went and read all the Kennedy speeches both Kennedy brothers. I couldn't name 10 legislative accomplishments of John Kennedy. Even foreign policy you know he managed the Cuban Missile Crisis as well the peace corps but I couldn't name nine. Iran deals. John F. Kennedy had the impact he had on people and people. The inspiration he gave that was still impacting me decades later. And then I think about Obama I think about all those billions of people in the United States and around the world who saw him and heard his speeches and watched him be decent and dignified. How did that impact them. And what are they going to do. A lot of them are running for office in this cycle. We've got more young people and people of color and women running for office. And so his legacy is a living thing. It didn't end on January 20th 2017 and I believe that in 10 years and 20 years and 30 years America is going to look a lot more like Barack Obama than Donald Trump.

[00:34:28] And that gives me on that note I will take questions.

[00:34:35] Ok I'm going to repeat that question. Well one. How did you not fall in love with Barack Obama.

[00:34:41] And I can answer the other ones pretty quickly. You know you have to be careful to not. These are these are human beings and you actually cannot be the best staffer that you can be if you are in love because you have to. You have to disagree sometimes and push back. But you know I unabashedly admired him. And you know when I was writing this book some people would give me the advice like well you know Stephanopoulos his book did really well because he punched Clinton in the face you know and I'm like well I'm not going to do that. And I go because you're pulling your

punches and I'm like No because I actually admire Barack Obama. But I try to make him three dimensional and he gets irritated in the book. And he but he is a good man. And so I think there's a way to feel that without being blinded. I never saw Idiocracy. I'll check it out. Michelle Obama is not going to run for president I'm sorry. Part of what we love about her is she's a real normal person and know someone like that is probably not wanting to spend two eight year terms in the White House. And your second one her translate anger. You know he did. I did want to answer because he did like that. And it wasn't unlike what I was saying about the press conference preparation like he did. He was very contained. Kind of the opposite of what we have now. And he he got the joke and frankly was sometimes he used to say sometimes he'd have Bulworth rants with us like what would he do if he won a full bowl worth of those of you saw that movie with Warren Beatty.

[00:36:11] So yes he liked that did President Obama have any regrets Yeah no he definitely did the interesting thing is you know when that form of question comes it's hard to say.

[00:36:29] People tend to think it would be if I wish I'd made X decision and why would have happened because. But but on foreign policy particular like you don't know you just you regret how things turned out in certain places. Obviously the Middle East Egypt Syria the inability to make peace for Israelis and Palestinians. We regret those outcomes. It's always hard to identify one thing and say well if only we done that this would have turned out differently. I think that the other thing is that and I don't know that he said this to me. So this is my interpretation I what very clear. But you know we have this majority at the beginning where we could do a lot. You know we could pass a trillion dollar stimulus to save the economy and the health care law and Wall Street reform and we knew we're going to keep that big of a majority. But you know you take something like immigration reform. We thought we could get to that. You know we thought that would be tough to do that. As we're doing all those other things. Right. And but we have six more years and inevitably we can get it from immigration reform done. We tried mightily to do it but we never had Democratic control of both houses.

[00:37:51] And that was never to happen without it. And so one of the things I think you know he does regret and I do is that you just don't know what you're not going to be able to do. If we could go back to 2009 and know the type of opposition we're going to face in the things that come at us you might you would definitely do things differently. You know but it's hard. You know it's hard to anticipate that in that moment. So I think there might be regret associated with the fact that if we had known that like the Republicans were never going to work with us you know the last two the one simple way of answering this is look at in the last two years. By then he figured it out and he was kind of unbound. Right. And gay marriage and climate change and Cuba and all kinds of things he found a freedom in recognizing that you know actually these people are not going to work with me. But I think that if we'd known that earlier I've always wondered whether we might have done things differently those first two years.

[00:38:59] So the question is how do we.

[00:39:03] You hear question.

[00:39:04] Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah okay yeah no we don't. So yeah. Like me try to answer.

[00:39:16] We're on a really tight schedule so the reality is quickly that some of these things I mean I'll offer you my view. Right. Which is different which is that some of the things that you mentioned Obama couldn't change by himself.

[00:39:35] Let me let me answer the question. He tried to close Guantanamo Bay for eight years. He can't close in the republic. Wait a second. Hear me out. The Republicans pass laws laws preventing the transfer of any detainee out of Guantanamo to the United States. You cannot close the facility if you have nowhere to put the people President Obama would if you could reform our criminal justice system to address those inequities. Republicans blocked it. What Donald Trump did that was so cynical is after eight years of obstruction him he comes in and says why didn't Obama fix those things. Was it because of Obama. It was because of the Republicans in Congress and. What the Republicans did

[00:40:18] That was so cynical.

[00:40:19] They knew that if they made the appearance of dysfunction and then told their people it was Obama's fault that there were some people who would go for that and vote for Donald Trump. And here we are and let me tell you all those things that you mentioned are not going to happen under Donald Trump. He wants to put more people in Guantanamo. He wants he has reversed any effort we made to address inequities in the sentencing system.

[00:40:45] So I would say that the basically a highly cynical strategy employed by the Republicans convince enough people to to mortgage their own futures by supporting down from did did Obama read the book and when did he think of it.

[00:41:07] My book here but he didn't read it. He liked it he thought it dealt with well.

[00:41:15] He was a little bitter because he's writing his own book and he's moving much slower. And so he said to me. I'm jealous because you know I have to write the whole story and you only had to do foreign policy so. You like it. But he's he's actually writing his own book.

[00:41:29] There's no writer helping him. And it's taking a long time but it will be a very good book.

[00:41:37] The man in the back.

[00:41:39] The question is Have you seen anybody in the horizon that you believe.

[00:41:42] So I haven't bought you know a lot of people didn't see Barack Obama coming. And one of the things that I'm excited about it some people don't like the fact that there's going to be like 15 or 20 Democrats running for president. I love that. Right. Because you know and I want there to be

outsiders. I don't want to just be a bunch of senators like I I want to see if somebody can find a message that meets the moment that can get people to turn out here and these elections have become about turning out more of our people.

[00:42:16] You know that the Obama coalition the problem we had is they didn't vote for people other than Obama. Young people voted in lesser numbers African-Americans voted to muster numbers. You need to inspire a critical mass of people to win elections and whoever can emerge from that field I believe can do that and it can surprise you. I didn't even know. Like probably everybody in this room this candidate and New York could beat Joe Crowley.

[00:42:41] She's incredible. I mean you know I've watched I went back

[00:42:44] And watched the videos I learned about her story. I'm like well I'm not suggesting the president frankly she's 28 she can't be.

[00:42:50] But it goes to show that if somebody it's a good message and so if somebody can can find that that that nerve that tap that vein. You know I want to be surprised by it. And so I don't want to list a bunch of names here. But I do think like if you look the one thing I'll say is if you look at Democrats we tend to win with outsiders like Barack Obama Bill Clinton even Jimmy Carter when it was Hillary Clinton John Kerry Al Gore Walter Mondale. Look we tend to not do better. And so and I love Joe Biden. And if he runs obviously to take that very seriously but like I'd like to see somebody kind of come from the outside and find that that opening. Last question

[00:43:38] The question is we miss how he speaks and what were some of the favorite your favorite lines your favorite things that you've heard him say.

[00:43:46] And if you can do it in his voice.

[00:43:49] So I I'll start with the softer the lighter angle and then and the more serious one I can mimic his speech pattern what we did do a lot of speechwriters is he had these verbal tics that we would make fun of them. And so he had one which was he get asked a question and he found like an absurdity to the fact of how much you repeat yourself in politics. And so you'd always say if you got asked something you'd say well look what I have said. And I don't know how many times we'd always say look what I have said or you will always reject notions. He would always say well the notion that X is true. I reject that notion. Right. And so one of the things that we did as speechwriters as we we late at the end of the administration we had a giant poster board and we had all these notions.

[00:44:42] There were direct quotes of all the notions that Barack Obama had rejected.

[00:44:45] And it was pretty funny because some of them negroes notions were very important like I reject the notion that we are divided as a people. And then some of them were very very specific like I reject the notion that I have to eat for breakfast or something you know.

[00:44:59] So that's how we were made fun of.

[00:45:00] I think in terms of things that he said and the way he said I there's obviously a million I'll focus on one which is I remember when there was a shooting in Charleston the white supremacist went into that church and shot and killed eight people at the beginning of that week Obama was so frustrated and angry at the gun violence angle of this that he told us that he didn't even he was out of words he couldn't give another speech like he was going to go visit the memorial service.

[00:45:30] He thought maybe he'd just attend the memorial services. What does her love to say. And then I remember the EU's obviously going to speak and the speechwriter did it draft wasn't me. He was a different speechwriter and Obama took it. And he he just rewrote it and it was one of if you're a speechwriter the best thing that can happen is if he rewrites it because it's much better speech whatever he's going to think you're the one who worked on it you know but it was very raw. If you go back in I'm going to get to the end of the speech Debra remembers. But if you read the speech is very visceral language about race and and criminal justice and guns and the Confederacy. I mean it's all in there. And I remember the speechwriter who was traveling with him. It's a really good friend of mine and he emailed me on the way. He's like hey this is crazy but like Obama said you know he's reframed the whole speech around the concept of grace and Obama said like yeah maybe I'll sing Amazing Grace. And I was like oh that's nuts he's never gonna do that. And so they don't remember I'm watching this in my office. And I was going after him and I was tired. And I can tell as he's delivering it like this is a this is a really powerful moment. It's a sad moment obviously because the lives that were lost but I could tell. And often in African-American churches he really you know he gets in a rhythm with the audience and he got to this point where I saw him say amazing grace and he kind of paused for like a little you know a long pause.

[00:47:02] I remember sitting thinking like oh my god he's actually going to sing. I could tell before he did like because they had been tipped off and I saw him kind of thinking and then he launches into this. And for me it was. I just remember seeing my desk and just sobbing because there was a catharsis about that that was so powerful and then politics rarely you get a moment that is totally surprising. And it spoke to the tragedy of those people. But it spoke to like everything the history of race in this country that the current divisions in the country like it was all coming out. But in this kind of beautiful moment where even the people in that conversation who knew those people were kind of lifted up and the soil on there was equally powerful in a way as I was in his office a couple of days later and I kind of walk in for a meeting. We're all standing there and usually walk and you're standing there and you know you stand until he sits down and he didn't get up from his desk and comes down. We're all just kind of standing there is like three of us. And he was reading a letter.

[00:48:09] And he used to always like to read letters that were sent him and he started reading aloud from this letter and the letter said Dear Mr. President my whole life I have hated people because of the color of their skin. And I now realize that that was wrong and that what happened to those people in that church was wrong and I want to thank you for that. And for all that you're trying to do to help people. And it was like if this one person can change it felt like you know it's possible. And that was the power of words words words matter. And that was one of the real takeaways to me again of the

Obama presidency the words matter and can have connections to people and promote changes in people that are unexpected.

[00:48:57] All of that is beautifully captured in a book that you will love. Thank you very much. Ben rolling so much goes

[00:49:10] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.