



# Thought Leader: Rachel Kleinfeld

Thought Leaders Forum

Rachel Kleinfeld, Devin T. Stewart, Anna Kiefer

## Transcript

*As part of the Carnegie Council Centennial Thought Leaders Forum, Carnegie Council's Devin Stewart spoke with Rachel Kleinfeld, founding president of the Truman National Security Project.*

**DEVIN STEWART:** Rachel, great to have you here. The first question that we ask our interviewees is, how do you see the world today? How do you define our time, particularly from a moral perspective?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** I think we live in a fascinating time right now. It's a time defined by change. But morally speaking, there really should not be much change. In reality, morality is based in human nature, and human nature is fairly unchangeable. So we live in a time in which human nature is having to accommodate to a lot of new information and so on. But morality is universal and timeless.

**DEVIN STEWART:** How do you see human morality? If it's timeless, what is it?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** I think it comes from the basic condition of being human, which is that we are immensely fragile beings. We're physically fragile. We're psychologically fragile. We are so easily crushed in so many ways. Yet we have such great hopes and dreams and ambitions. The human spirit is so much more immense than what any human lifespan can achieve. That puts us in a very unique moral place of self-awareness, of ego, of desire. Struggling with those emotions in order to be the best possible human being we can be while on this earth is the ridge print of morality.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Tell us about this paradox or this tension between a time of great change and yet this "constantness" of morality. What are the implications of that paradox?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** I think there are implications of the paradoxical condition we live in both at a governmental level and at an implementation level. Let me put it this way. We are like individuals in a videogame, actors in a videogame. We can move in real time at the speed of human thought, at the speed of human implementation, but all around us the game, the scenery, the terrain is changing constantly. By the time we have shot our gun or moved up a level in the game, everything is already different.

That's the situation we're finding ourselves in because of the interdependence of information, the interdependence of countries, of peoples, the breakdown of borders. Yet we're still limited by what human beings can do.

There are theories—the [singularity theory](#), for instance—that we're going to somehow morph with cyborgs and be bigger than ourselves. In some ways that's true. I can't do anything without my computer at this point. I can barely think if I'm not typing. But it also is limiting. Our memories seem to be getting shorter and less accurate as we're outsourcing more of that to computers.

So we're living in this age of incredible change, but we're quite limited in what the human mind can

handle. And that doesn't seem to change that much.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Going back to the constantness of human morality, do you see shared values across cultures and societies? If so, what are they?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** I think there are universal values that are shared in all cultures. There's research on that and there are psychological studies, but you can also see it when you're traveling around the world—things like reciprocity, fairness, a sense of justice, trust and what it takes to elicit that trust, being truthful. Those are shared values. But they're interpreted quite differently in different cultures. In some cultures there's a very "us-them" component. That subculture within any country or within any nation or ethnic group breaks morality down very much into "us-them" and has different moralities sometimes for who is part of the in-group and the out-group. That contrasts very greatly with the morality of people who say, "Come unto me, the least of my children," who say, "We are all one in the same world. We are all part of the same entity and need to be treated the same."

You see that breakdown not so much across cultures as within cultures. I think that's a fundamental reality of our times, that the breakdowns are much more between us-them groups, within America, within the Muslim world, within parts of Asia, and groups that see each other as part of the same world, part of the same common humanity in each of those cultures.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Before we go to the next question, we interviewed the [grand mufti](#) of Bosnia, and he described it—what I think you're talking about—as "extreme similarities" that create conflict.

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** What a nice way to put it.

**DEVIN STEWART:** People are so similar that people start arguing about the minutiae.

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** That's really interesting.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Is that kind of what you're talking about?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** I'm actually talking about something a little bit different. Maybe I can get into it in a different way.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Go ahead.

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** I think there are two types of people in the world, distributed universally across all cultures, not just in our culture versus another culture. There are people whose biochemical makeup is much more about "us-them." There are actually a lot of chemical studies of this. The reality of that biochemical makeup means they split the world into two different groups and they hew to their own and they look for differences with the other.

There are people who have less of that makeup and who are much more likely to see "yes, and . . ." solutions, "both of us together in the same common humanity" solutions, who don't draw the same distinctions between groups all the time.

You see those two personalities across all cultures. You see them in America, in the Muslim world, in Asia. They are very different and they yield very different moralities.

**DEVIN STEWART:** That's a great theme. Probably one of the most profound themes we have heard is this almost physiological aspect of the brain where you have opposing forces of tribalism on the one hand and empathy on the other.

Related to this question, we're looking at this idea of a global ethic. Does that mean anything to you? If so, what is it?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** A global ethic. You know, I don't think I've ever thought about that. What do you mean by that?

**DEVIN STEWART:** It's sort of an open question. From our point of view, it's ethical principles that relate to the globe and that are shared by all people. That's sort of a working definition. Does that resonate with you at all?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** I certainly think there are ethical principles that are shared, that are deep and innate in our human nature—ideas of justice and fairness, things like that. I do think that morality tends to be construed very differently. I'll give you an example.

When I was in Albania doing research on the rule of law, people were very worried about corruption. Everyone was talking about corruption. There was a lot of interest in the topic. Someone did a poll and said, "If a flower seller raises their prices before a major holiday, is that corrupt, and should it be punished?" They also said, "If a teacher takes a bribe for giving a student a good grade, is that corrupt, and should that be punished?" About two-thirds of the Albanians said the flower seller was corrupt and should be punished, and about two-thirds said the teacher wasn't, or if she was corrupt, she was justified, and should not be punished.

We were all talking about the same universal values and ideals—fairness, a sense of justice. But the interpretation of those in different cultures can be radically different.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Tell me about what you would like to see in the future. Part of our project is looking back at the past 100 years, as we turn 100. Part of it is also thinking about what's important in the future. We don't like to put people on the spot and ask for a prediction, but what would you like to see happen in the next century?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** I would love to see the expansion of human empowerment, of human flourishing. I think one of the greatest injustices of our time is that while people are born with ability and values and equality at birth, the distribution of ability to get things done in the world, of education, poverty, war, conflict, movements because of refugee activity—all of that is extremely unequally distributed, fundamentally unjust. It might continue into the future if we don't solve that problem. But I would like to see more of us working on a solution to enable human empowerment.

I think of a lot of this in the context of [Steve Jobs](#). I happen to be a big fan of some of his products. Steve Jobs's biological father was from Syria. If he had grown up in Syria, where would we be today? Where would all of his ingenuity be today? What would have happened to that for the world?

I think of all the other people, all the [Einsteins](#), all the Steve Jobses, all the amazing individuals who have such potential who can't express that because of fundamental injustices that are holding them back.

That's the major issue, I think, of our time, particularly as the world gets so much more interconnected.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Related to that—maybe it's the same answer—what would you see as the greatest ethical question of our time?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** Basically the same answer. I think, on the positive side, it's empowerment. It's finding a way to enable all of these billions of people to flourish, to show their best selves to the world, to contribute to the world. It's not just about helping them; it's about them helping others and all that talent getting used.

On the negative side, I think it's about quelling injustice, reducing injustice, the unequal distribution of assets and goods compared to the very equal distribution of hopes and dreams across the world. That's the other challenge of our time.

**DEVIN STEWART:** At [Truman](#), we learned a lot about what leadership is. You have heard a lot of experts and I'm sure you have thought about it a lot. What does moral leadership mean to you?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** Moral leadership requires self-awareness, a willingness to listen to others, and a particular combination of courage and humility. You have to have the courage of your convictions, the willingness to think them through, to take them to their conclusion, and then the humility to say the world is not aseptic. The world is not clean and easy. It doesn't fall into simple analytical categories. You need humanity in applying these principles and you need empathy. That mix of courage and humility is rare. But you see that defined over and over and over again, from the Level 5 leader of [Jim Collins's \*Good to Great\*](#), to the founders of the Jesuit order, to people like [Gandhi](#) or [Martin Luther King](#).

**DEVIN STEWART:** Perfect.

[Andrew Carnegie](#) was one of the leading advocates 100 years ago for something that seemed a little bit unusual, world peace. It seems almost like a cliché today. We still think this legacy should be carried on. Is world peace possible?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** [Steve Pinker](#) is a thinker who has a really interesting [book](#) about this. What he says is we're moving closer and closer to peace. The world is becoming less and less violent. Actually, he would echo Carnegie and say in Carnegie's age we idolized violence in certain ways. It was a more masculine culture. We actually really looked up to the warrior spirit. Now, in many cultures at least, he calls it a feminization, a lack of lionizing of that.

I actually, and unfortunately, think that Pinker is very wrong. I think he's looking at traditional warfare. Traditional warfare does seem to be on the decline, but deaths from injustice are actually quite significant in the 21st century. You see much more civilian death. *[Editor's note: Check out Steven Pinker's September 2012 discussion with [Robert D. Kaplan](#) at Carnegie Council entitled "[Is the World Becoming More Peaceful?](#)"]*

Let me give you a number of examples: [World War II](#) and the [Holocaust](#), the [Cambodian genocide](#), the [Cultural Revolution](#) and the manmade [famine](#) under [Mao](#) in China, the [Stalinist collectivization](#)—millions upon millions of deaths, not battlefield deaths, by and large. Civilians were killed. But instinct toward totalitarianism and control of others and control of their ideas has led to a vast amount of injustice.

It might not be sadistic. It might not be brutal in quite the same way as the Middle Ages and back in history when we had crucifixion. It's a little bit more hands-off. But that doesn't make it any less violent.

So I think we, unfortunately, live in an age—I almost think of it, and I don't know if this is mathematically true—of a power log distribution, where you see fewer instances of violence, fewer

cockfights on the street and dogfights and that kind of casual sadism, but each time there is an instance, the number of deaths and the amount of brutality are far higher. I think that might just be a factor of human life.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Rachel, who is ultimately accountable for the problems we have talked about today?

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** I think every human being is accountable for these problems. My father used to say that one of the geniuses of the founders of the United States was that they took all the power and they put it in a big glass sphere and then they threw it on the floor and it broke into shards. So everyone has some little piece of power, some little piece of action that they can control. I really think that's now true for the world. The information age has made it so that everyone can do a little something.

We're in an age where every person can have access to global information. If they have access to a cell phone, which most of the world now has access to, they can be a voice for awareness, for ethicality within their community, but across the globe. We've never been in an age where people had a voice like that.

So they all have a responsibility, too. It's the rent we pay for living on this planet.

Growing up in Fairbanks, Alaska, I used to feel a real conflict between the people who would come out to live good lives and to build on the land. They would often go off into the forests and build self-sustaining cabins way out. They would live good lives, but they wouldn't affect anyone. I thought, you know, that's not actually a moral life. We are social beings. We are part of the world, and we need to affect the world, even if it's just the world around us.

But with the tools we have today, hopefully most of us can do a lot more.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Perfect, Rachel. Thank you so much. Great. I love the cabin analogy.

**RACHEL KLEINFELD:** That's really true. I thought about that all the time.

It was a real tension. You'd get all these people, all these Harvard hippies in the 1970s. They were super highly educated back-to-the-landers, because it was the whole movement in the 1970s. They went to Vermont. They went to Alaska. They went to Santa Fe. That was slightly younger than my parents' generation and slightly older than me. They were all over. You would see them and think—in the value system of Alaska, they're at the top of the heap. Maybe here being an investment banker is kind of the top of the heap. In Alaska, having a cabin and no toilet and no running water, you are living the dream. That's the Alaskan dream.

But I always thought, "You went to Harvard or whatever—a good school—and you've had all this invested in you. Live the dream for five years and then bring the dream back to somebody else. Do something with it."

### **Point B Podcast**

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### **Video Clip**

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