

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Thought Leader: Brent Scowcroft

Thought Leaders Forum

Brent Scowcroft, Devin T. Stewart, Anna Kiefer

Transcript

As part of the the Carnegie Council Centennial Thought Leaders Forum, Carnegie Council's Devin Stewart spoke with Brent Scowcroft, a retired United States Air Force lieutenant general who served as the U.S. national security advisor under presidents Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush.

DEVIN STEWART: General, thank you so much for coming to Carnegie Council today. It's an honor to have you here.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: It's my great pleasure.

DEVIN STEWART: When you look out at the world today, how would you describe it, specifically from moral terms, and what is unique?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: I believe the world now is in the latter phases of what I would call the [Westphalian](#) nation-state [system](#). That was a system made up of wholly independent entities who acknowledged allegiance to no higher order than themselves. They would gang together with or against each other. It almost became a zero-sum game. Someone else getting stronger meant you were getting weaker.

I think that is now facing increased competition by what I would call the world of globalization, which deals with issues that transcend national borders. More and more of the things that countries, nations, governments want to do for their citizens can't be done nationally. They have to reach out to others.

So I think we're in a process of the uneasy interaction of these two. That gives me some hope for the future.

DEVIN STEWART: What are the moral implications of this new phase?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: I think the moral implications are basically this (and I think the [Arab Awakening](#) is a good example of it): That is, for most of world history, the bulk of the world's population didn't engage in the political process at all. They lived their own little lives. They lived just like their parents lived. They thought their children would live just like they did. That was the order of things.

Now, with modern communications—cell phones, TV, everything—they look out and they look at TV and they say, "It doesn't have to be that way." I think this has given rise to an upwelling of a demand for what I would call dignity: "We're not chattel. We need to be treated like human beings. There are certain rights. We don't belong to anybody."

I think that is a force that is growing in importance.

DEVIN STEWART: You sound optimistic. Would you say things are getting better or worse?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: I sound optimistic, but it's only relative. I think they're probably getting better. But if you look at Ancient Greece and the world now, there has not been an awful lot of progress. I think any optimism has to be measured, because I think what we're dealing with—and this is far beyond my expertise—is the nature of the human being.

What are the kinds of things which are instinctive in human beings? I think we probably have a territorial instinct, maybe a tribal instinct, whatever that means. But I think that has a huge impact on what we feel comfortable with and what we don't feel comfortable with. Maybe, to make great ethical progress, we need to transcend our physical nature in a way we have not been able to do.

DEVIN STEWART: That's actually part of our next question. What we're looking at here partly is defining a global ethic, if there is one. We don't know. We're exploring that idea.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: That's a very good question. We have had great success in taming the physical world around us. We have taken natural resources and built a wonderful life out of them. We have not had that success in dealing with the internal aspects of the human being. I would say that the ultimate in ethics right now—I would use the term "dignity," to be treated as an individual who does not belong to anybody and who has certain rights.

DEVIN STEWART: Which rights do you think are most important?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: We have defined rights—as a matter of fact, you all have defined them—the code of human rights. I would say the basic one is to treat others the way you would have others treat you. That's as simple a formulation and about as complete as you can go.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you think that one is shared across cultures?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: Not yet. Even when it is shared, a lot of people don't practice it—"oh, yes, that's good, but not in business," or not here or not there, or, "I have the best interests of my neighbor or mankind, so I can break the rules." Those things are still very much part of us.

DEVIN STEWART: What would you say is the greatest ethical challenge we face today?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: I would say the need for human dignity.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you have a sense of how we can get there? Is it a matter of educating people? Is it a matter of institutional change?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: I wish I knew. I wish I knew. It's probably all of those things. It's working at all the things. We're nationally not in a good position to do it now. We have since [Woodrow Wilson](#) been messianic, if you will, in spreading democracy, but in particular ways. We ask people to emulate us, and yet if they look at our political system and our political debate now, there's nothing in particular to emulate.

DEVIN STEWART: What specifically are you concerned about with the American political system?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: It seems to me that the American political system is, maybe not uniquely, but importantly based on compromise. If you go through the [Constitution](#), the Constitution is a model of

compromise, virtually every chapter. Yet much of the political circles in Washington treat compromise as a dirty word: compromise means you're abandoning your principles, which is not at all true. But that's the way it's looked at now. The purer you are, the better you are. But you can't run a system that way.

DEVIN STEWART: It sounds like an issue of leadership as well.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: I think, importantly, leadership, and I would say across the board. One of our virtues has been talking with people who have different ideas, in the hope that by melding those ideas, we can move forward—maybe not 100 percent the way we want, but more than 50 or more than nothing.

We have had leaders in the Congress and so on who have reached across the aisle to people who have very different philosophies and said, "Let's get together on this issue"—whether it's education, whatever it is—"and mold something that we can both agree moves us forward."

We don't do that anymore. There is virtually nobody left in Congress like a [Ted Kennedy](#), who was a very partisan senator, but over and over again, would reach across the aisle and get somebody to mold a piece of legislation which would advance the national interests.

DEVIN STEWART: That's very specific to U.S. politics. What about American foreign policy thinking, generally? Are you also concerned?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: We have gone through, I would say, three phases in American foreign policy. In the first phase, which lasted over 100 years, the foreign policy was really "stay away from foreign policy," and the [John Quincy Adams](#) thing: Wherever the banner of freedom and liberty is exposed, there are our well wishes, but we go not in search of monsters to slay. We're the well-wishers of all. We're the guarantors only of our own.

That happened until Woodrow Wilson. Woodrow Wilson said, "No. We need to proselytize our virtues." Then the last phase of recent years, we were even prepared to proselytize with the sword.

So we have gone through a variety of phases, and now we seem to be searching for a new one.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you have a sense of what the new one might be?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: No, I don't, except I think climbing aboard what I would call the Arab Spring, the cry for human dignity, is a pretty good start for what we need to do.

DEVIN STEWART: Looking forward, world peace, what does it mean, and is it possible? [Andrew Carnegie](#) is peering over us.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: World peace, I think, is highly unlikely. We use that term loosely. The [president](#) used it when he was talking about nuclear weapons. He said we need to return to the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. I think [World War I](#), [World War II](#)—I think that's a part of our nature that will take our best efforts.

We started—Carnegie—with the [League of Nations](#), the United Nations. It has fallen on hard times now. We pay no attention to the United Nations anymore. In a world of globalization where more and more has to be done in a world community, we need to be thinking, what can we do with the United Nations to make it a more effective transmitter of ethics, among other things?

DEVIN STEWART: Do you think the United Nations system is a good tool to transmit that?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: It's a very imperfect instrument, but right now it's the only one we have. I think we should be working hard to say, how can we turn it into an instrument that more effectively can help us build the social environment the way we built the physical environment?

DEVIN STEWART: For all the things that you have talked about today—dignity, transfer to another world system, and using the United Nations more effectively—how do you think about accountability? Who ultimately is accountable for what we have talked about today?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: The problem is that nobody is accountable. But that is because it's hard in the world, the structure that we have now—who makes one accountable? Right now accountability has been the victors over the vanquished. More times than not, the victors have been, relatively speaking, the good side. But that has been what it is. The fundamental aim of accountability being in terms of ethical progress has not really been prominent.

DEVIN STEWART: Finally, General, is there anything that you would like to add to your thoughts today?

BRENT SCOWCROFT: I've already told you a lot more than I know.

I think this anniversary of Andrew Carnegie is a useful time to, if you will, dust off these ideas, which have been around a long time. A few years before World War I, the pundits were saying, "There's never going to be another war. We're smarter than that now. War is stupid. There will never be another one." This was just before the worst one ever. We need to think hard, while we can, about how we can produce, if you will, the ethical world which will give us control over our social beings the way we have control over the physical world.

DEVIN STEWART: Thank you so much, General. That's a great advertisement for what we do as well. We really appreciate it.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: My pleasure.

DEVIN STEWART: It was an excellent interview.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: I wish it were that easy.

Point B Podcast

ANNA KIEFER: I'm Anna Kiefer and this is Point B.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: I believe the world now is in the latter phases of what I would call the [Westphalian](#) nation-state system.

ANNA KIEFER: Today's guest is Brent Scowcroft. After retiring from the United States Air Force as a lieutenant general, Scowcroft served as national security advisor to the [George H. W. Bush](#) and [Ford](#) administrations, and assisted President [Obama](#) in choosing his national security team.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: The Westphalian nation-state system was a system made up of wholly independent entities who acknowledged allegiance to no higher order than themselves. They would gang together with or against each other. It almost became a zero-sum game. Someone else getting stronger meant you were getting weaker.

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So I think we're in a process of the uneasy interaction of these two. That gives me some hope for the future.

ANNA KIEFER: General Scowcroft believes globalization's greatest export is a demand for human dignity.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: For most of world history, the bulk of the world's population didn't engage in the political process at all. They lived their own little lives. They lived just like their parents lived. They thought their children would live just like they did. That was the order of things.

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ANNA KIEFER: This raises the question of America's role in promoting these values.

BRENT SCOWCROFT: We have gone through, I would say, three phases in American foreign policy. In the first phase, which lasted over 100 years, the foreign policy was really "stay away from foreign policy," and the [John Quincy Adams](#) thing: Wherever the banner of freedom and liberty is exposed, there are our well wishes, but we go not in search of monsters to slay. We're the well-wishers of all. We're the guarantors only of our own.

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ANNA KIEFER: That was General Brent Scowcroft.

Video

Retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant general Brent Scowcroft discusses the shift away from compromise in the U.S. political system.

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