

RICHARD: When we consider what it means to be a citizen, most Americans would probably say, "That involves individual rights."

ASHLEY: In this episode, we hear a call for changing the meaning of citizenship. Our guest, Richard Haass, the former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, says if democracy's to survive, we must think more about our obligations to one another.

DR. HAASS: Individual rights have been raised up to a level of absolutes, and any infringement of those is rejected by a significant percentage of our society, and my view is simply we can't have a society that will function only on rights if these rights are seen in absolute terms. We have to be prepared to compromise. We need mechanisms for dealing with the friction.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Our guest on this episode says the greatest threat to America comes not from foreign adversaries but from ourselves. Richard Haass argues that finding common ground and healing bitter divisions require placing obligations on the same footing as rights.

ASHLEY: Haass is an experienced diplomat and policymaker. He spent 20 years at the Council on Foreign Relations and served in the Pentagon, State Department, and the White House under four presidents, Democrat and Republican alike.

RICHARD: His new book is called *The Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens*.

ASHLEY: I was away when this interview was recorded, so, Richard, you asked the questions.

RICHARD: Richard Haass, welcome to Let's Find Common Ground.

DR. HAASS: Thanks so much for having me.

RICHARD: America faces dangerous threats from overseas from Russia, from China, from North Korea, for example. Many would argue that global climate change is also a severe threat. But you say that the number one threat is from within our nation and that the most urgent priority right now is to uphold our democracy. Why?

DR. HAASS: Well, for two reasons. All those threats and others you mention are all too real, but if one looks, say, at the last 75 years, we have faced any number of serious threats, and we've done quite okay, thank you very much, including managing a Cold War, ending it on terms that even optimists didn't imagine, and we kept it cold. The first reason that what happens here domestically so much is it's central, it's critical to our ability to cope with the traditionalists of national security challenges that you mentioned.

Secondly, everything we do as a society, everything we do as an economy, everything we do as a political systems assumes, is predicated on the idea that we function. Just say that ceases to be true. I spent several years, three years as the American envoy to the Northern Ireland peace talks. I then went back for another six months for a separate round of peace talks. Northern Ireland is a modern society in the middle of Europe in the UK, and over the course of three decades, during the so-called Troubles, suddenly, doing the most mundane things became heroic.

It's interesting how much depends upon, basically, order and a political process that people accept the legitimacy of and the ability to go about one's business and not fear physical threats. Well, just say that was no longer true in the United States. What I think we've had a glimpse of is that we shouldn't assume it will always be true. I take our political polarization and the glimmers of violence that we've had, I take them seriously.

RICHARD: Many people would say that January 6th is the worst example of polarization, but that tends to blame one side. When we speak of polarization, is this a problem primarily of populist Republicans, of Trump lovers, or is it much broader than that? Does it include many other forms of dysfunction and intolerance?

DR. HAASS: It's a really thoughtful question. We've entered an era of winner-take-all politics where in the political space, in private lives, people are just less inclined to compromise. Civility has broken down. Violence is often introduced. We often see it at school meetings and so forth, at a Little League. So I think it's too narrow to simply pin it on the Republican Party, but that said, and I say this, by the way, as someone who is a Republican for over 40 years, this Republican Party is different, and American democracy, while we've had to contend with third parties and outliers who represented a kind of populist dimension, I would say this is something different where one of the two major political parties has essentially been taken over by a populist, not just an individual but a movement. That is a threat to American democracy that the founders and their successors just simply didn't imagine.

RICHARD: Do you think the threat to democracy today is so much worse than it has been in previous eras of American history?

DR. HAASS: Short answer's yes. It's a threat both to the functioning of our democracy, our ability to compromise to get things done. And then, yes, I think this degree of polarization leading to violence is something qualitatively different. So, yeah, in many ways, I'd say we probably have to go back, and it's not a happy period. It's the era in the mid-19th century surrounding the Civil War when you had a degree of intensity and absolutism to our political disagreements. We don't have a single issue like slavery that is so defining, but we do have an absolutism and an intolerance that has entered into our politics that anyone who's looking closely should be worried by.

RICHARD: Karl Rove wrote a very interesting article recently in The Wall Street Journal. It's called "America Is Often a Nation Divided." "U.S. politics today is ugly and broken, true enough," he writes, "but the good news is it was worst in the past." Part of his case is that during the 1960s and '70s, we had riots, we had assassinations, and we had 2,500 domestic bombings in just 18 months in 1971 and '72. That's almost unthinkable today. Are you being too negative?

DR. HAASS: I read Karl's piece. I would respectfully disagree. I think he's too sanguine. Yes, we've had differences in the past, and I grew up in the '60s, but a lot of those things were not threats to American democracy. They were motivated by disagreements about the Vietnam War or other issues. Even the assassinations, as awful as they were, of presidents and presidential candidates and civil rights leaders were not revolutionary acts.

What's so different about what we face now is we have seen elements of a revolutionary situation where people don't want to promote simply policy outcomes, but they want to change the process. They want to change the structures, the operations of American democracy. That is fundamentally different than

anything we've seen in the past. So I do think this is both different and more worrisome. So I'm not a member of the sanguine school. I'm not a member of, "We've seen worse. We've seen it all before. We've gotten through it then. We'll get through it now." Hopefully, that's right. I'd love to be proven wrong here. My own sense is it won't sort itself out by itself, and we need all sorts of citizens in this society to get more involved.

RICHARD: Talk about the media and its influence and why and how the media has changed in recent years.

DR. HAASS: Well, look, I'm looking at you, you're looking at me as we do this podcast. We, shall we say, our generations are in the same zip code. So we grew up in an era of mass media, and we grew up in an era of broadcasting. There were three major networks. They were truly national. You had a couple of nightly news programs, and the next day, a lot of people back in the old days when we went into offices, we had the common experience.

None of that is true today. We live in an era not of broadcasting but of narrowcasting. Social media's a relatively recent phenomenon. People are able to find communities in which they feel comfortable, where they often have their own views reinforced. There's no vetting. There's no fact-checking. It's not news in many cases. It's just pure opinion, or it's propaganda, or whatever you want to describe it as. There's no quality control. So, yeah, I think the media landscape is one of the drivers of where we find ourselves politically and socially.

RICHARD: Many of the fierce debates we've been having, some of them about the Constitution, are framed as being arguments about rights. You argue in your book that we have responsibilities as citizens or obligations. Why do they matter so much, and why should they be part of the conversation we're having over rights?

DR. HAASS: Rights are essential to the American experience. When we think about American democracy, we think of words like "rights," like "freedoms," "freedom of speech," "freedom of assembly," "freedom of religion," "freedom from religion," and the Bill of Rights. So rights are essential and, indeed, another way to think of American history over the period since is the greater access to rights: civil rights, the fact that gay people can get married under the law. So many things have changed in our society. My point is simply that rights are necessary. They're central. They're everything except sufficient.

Sooner or later, rights come into conflict. A mother's right to choose the rights of the unborn, well, how do you deal with that if rights are seen as absolute? Or someone's right, under the Second Amendment, to bear arms -- well, how about the right of public safety? Can there be any conditioning or limiting of those rights, either who has access to guns or what kinds of guns? We had a fierce debate, as you recall, over the last couple of years about vaccines and masks, about rights not to get vaccinated or wear a mask, and how did that conflict, again, with the right to public health and public safety?

So it turns out democracies can't be based on a foundation of rights alone. We've lost the balance. JFK talked about, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." I don't hear a lot of that anymore.

RICHARD: It's interesting that you mentioned the recent debate over mask-wearing and vaccinations during the COVID pandemic because in that debate, at least, there was talk about obligations, about you were obligated as a citizen to help protect the health of others.

DR. HAASS: Well, we've lost that somewhere along the way. Individual rights have been raised up to a level of absolutes, and any infringement of those is rejected by a significant percentage of our society. My view is simply we can't have a society that will function only on rights if these rights are seen in absolute terms. We have to be prepared to compromise. We need mechanisms for dealing with the friction between different interpretations of rights. So that was essentially the genesis of this book.

ASHLEY: Richard Haass speaking on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. One way to stay informed as a citizen is to learn more about our elected representatives, members of Congress, senators, and governors.

ASHLEY: The Common Ground Scorecard shows how much candidates campaigning for public office demonstrate a willingness to pursue common ground. The scorecard helps voters understand how much or how little candidates work across the political aisle.

RICHARD: And now there's a new scorecard. It features candidates who are running for president.

ASHLEY: Find out more at commongroundscorecard.org.

RICHARD: People in Washington are talking about it. You can go to commongroundscorecard.org.

ASHLEY: Now back to Richard's interview with Richard Haass.

RICHARD: What is the difference between our obligations and requirements?

DR. HAASS: I've tried to parse three words, which is obligations, responsibilities, and requirements, and it gets pretty parsed. I feel like one of those religious scholars poring over the text. But we'll start with requirements. Those are things you have to do. You have to pay taxes. When there's a draft, you have to report. You have to stop at red lights. These are things you have to do, and if you don't, you pay a price for it. Could be a fine, could be imprisonment, whatever, but there's no gray area there.

Responsibilities and obligations are different. Those are things you should do or ought to do. Responsibilities, I see as a little bit more personal. We try to encourage people to assume certain responsibilities because we think they're good. Obligations are more than that. They're good things, but also, they're things we owe one another. We do them not because it's best for ourselves, but we do them because we have connections to other people in this society. We do have to, to some extent, be our brother's or sister's keeper in order to make the larger society work, but also, it's in our own self-interest.

RICHARD: In your book, you list ten obligations that we have as citizens. Let's walk through at least some of them, two that seem fairly obvious but perhaps aren't to many people is, "Be involved," and, "Stay informed."

DR. HAASS: Yeah, those are the first two. Jefferson basically said, "Being an informed citizen is the single most important thing for a democracy." It's the only way to hold elected officials to account. It's the only way to know, when you do walk into a voting booth, how to vote because you've been informed. But then you've got to walk into the voting booth. That's the most fundamental form of involvement, and it

turns out a significant chunk of Americans are not informed for whatever reason. They don't bother, or they go to this or that social media site which misinforms rather than informs. Look at the numbers of Americans who are not involved in our political lives. The reason midterm elections were critical by any measure -- we're talking about, what, ten months ago -- more than half of eligible voters didn't vote.

RICHARD: The next three obligations are, "Stay open to compromise," "Remain civil," and "Reject violence." Pretty basic.

DR. HAASS: Pretty basic. I always feel slightly, what's the word, guilty for having to include them because you would've thought they were pretty self-evident. Alas, not. Compromise has somehow become a dirty word in our society. Somehow if you compromise, you're unprincipled. Well, no, but not everything is a sword you die on. You have to be willing to compromise a degree, often, in order to get things done. There may also be some legitimacy to the other point of view. Civility just makes conversations possible, and just because you disagree, you and I might disagree on an issue today, one of the good things about civility is it keeps open the possibility we could agree and work together on another issue tomorrow. You avoid destroying relationships that may come in handy.

The case for nonviolence is obvious. First of all, nonviolence has been proven to be a pretty successful tactic if you look at the civil rights movement, you look at what Gandhi accomplished in India. But also, again, if violence becomes a staple of our politics, that's the end of politics as we know it.

RICHARD: The next obligation is, "Value norms," and I was interested in that. I'm not sure, or I wasn't sure before I read your book, what it means. What's the difference between a law and a norm?

DR. HAASS: Norms are things that ought to be done as opposed to laws are things that have to be done. We'll use Donald Trump as an example here. The fact that he did not participate in the transfer of power in the Biden inauguration, that was the violation of a norm. There's nothing about that norm that he had to do. There's nothing in it in the Constitution. There's no legal penalty that he'd get fined or imprisoned for not doing it.

But, again, it's the kind of thing you should do because it signals that democracy is bigger than me. It signals that for all of our political differences, we both put democracy first. What a great message to the world that that communicates, Reagan's idea that we're a "shining city on a hill." Well, we never shine better than when we have a peaceful transfer of power between individuals who are political opponents.

RICHARD: The next obligation is dear to our hearts at Common Ground Committee and this podcast, Let's Find Common Ground, which is, "Promote the public good," which I'm sure includes promoting some sense of common ground.

DR. HAASS: Absolutely. It goes beyond things that you have to do. There might be legal requirements, but I'm saying, short of those things, we have obligations to our fellow citizens whether they're neighbors, coworkers, what have you.

RICHARD: Obligation number eight in your list of ten is obvious maybe to some people, but I think it's taken on greater importance in recent years, and that is, "Respect government service," not necessary respect the actions of government, but respect people who are working for the government and, in most cases, working for the public good.

DR. HAASS: 100 percent. I hate the phrase "deep state." It implies the government is hostile. And there's people like your neighbor, your sister, your brother, your husband, your wife, what have you, tens of millions of Americans work in the public space at the federal level, the state level, the county level, the city level, what have you. And we want the best and the brightest to go into government because government has such an impact on our lives. So we should value government service. We don't pay people a hell of a lot to work in government, so we ought to give them respect. We ought to give them our thanks. We have the all-volunteer force in the military. We want the best and the brightest to go into that. We have a career foreign service, a career intelligence service, and so forth. We want talented people.

So my point about government is not that it's always right. Of course it isn't, but I do want the best people to go in, which increases the odds that it will be right. And government does stuff that benefits all of us. Virtually every aspect of our life, for better and for worse, is influenced by government. I want to make it for better.

RICHARD: The ninth obligation could really be the subject of an entire podcast, and I hope it will be with you at a future time, and that is, "Support teaching of civics."

DR. HAASS: It is my favorite obligation. It is the one that I spend the most time talking about. So I'm happy to come back and devote a podcast to it. But, yeah, I hate the idea that young people can go to a two or four-year college or university, and if they navigate those course requirements in a clever fashion, they'll never be exposed to civics, or that many high schools and middle schools don't teach civics, or what they call civics is really not. I just think our schools ought to prepare people for citizenry.

This is a country that was based on ideas, on certain values, and we're not transmitting them. So we have got to make a collective commitment. Look, on many things, I'm not naive. We've politicized education, so it won't be easy, but I believe this needs to be a priority. Here we are, we're three years away from the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. I would hope that over the next three years, we will see significant progress towards putting civics back in schools, back in colleges, back in universities, building some consensus about what everybody ought to be exposed to. The idea is not to politically indoctrinate, but the idea is to give people an understanding of or appreciation of democracy.

RICHARD: The tenth obligation, I have to admit, is a reach for many, many people. Perhaps not if you're in the military, but it is a reach for a lot of us, and that is, "Put the country first."

DR. HAASS: Right, but isn't that a sad statement, that it's a reach? It's one of those things that, if you take a step back and say, "This is so basic. Are you sure you need to use up one of your obligations on this? Isn't it obvious?" And the answer is, sure, it's obvious, but it doesn't mean it's always respected. It's sad that I have to advocate for it. It's sad that probably the two of us could mention some cases where it's true.

The fact that it stands out, that it's an exception is why we have -- John Kennedy wrote the book Profiles in Courage, and he wrote about -- I think it was eight senators who either compromised when compromise was unfashionable or held firm against compromise when it was the right thing to do. It'd be hard to fill another volume right now, and that's not a good thing. We should encourage people to do the right thing, and as voters, we ought to reward it.

RICHARD: Richard Haass, thank you for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

DR. HAASS: Glad to see we found some common ground. Thank you for having me.

ASHLEY: Richard Haass, talking about his new book, The Bill of Obligations.

RICHARD: You can certainly argue, Ashley, about who's to blame for polarization and the threats to our democracy, but what was most interesting to me really came in the second half of the interview, which were his solutions and how we can think anew about what it means to be a good, or at least an adequate citizen.

ASHLEY: Right, and in the coming months, we hope to speak to Richard Haass again about civics education, something he's obviously really passionate about.

RICHARD: Yeah. He argues that education should be playing a big role in helping us become more committed citizens.

ASHLEY: It won't be easy. Some local communities are just as divided about what should be taught in the schools as Congress is about government spending.

RICHARD: So we would argue that's the reason why all of us need to be better at finding common ground.

ASHLEY: Thanks for listening to our podcast. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard on Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: Our podcast team includes Common Ground Committee cofounders Bruce Bond and Erik Olsen.

RICHARD: And Mary Anglade, Britney Chapman, Donna Vislocky, and Hannah Weston.

ASHLEY: And our editor and sound designer, Miranda Shaffer.

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