



Ethics Matter: A Conversation with Jeffrey Sachs

Jeffrey D. Sachs , Julia Taylor Kennedy

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Jeffrey D. Sachs speaks at a student rally protesting poverty.
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Introduction

JULIA KENNEDY: Hi. I'm Julia Taylor Kennedy, program officer here at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.

Welcome to everyone in the room and everyone watching on our webcast stream today. I look forward to a very robust discussion today.

Jeffrey Sachs and I will talk for about 25 minutes, and then I'm eager to open this up, as this is a town hall forum, to you all. Our

guest today has long championed ethics in international affairs. If you think of any large-scale effort to confront global inequality in the last 30 years, the Harvard-educated economist Jeffrey Sachs is in the mix. He cut his teeth advising countries on implementing [economic shock therapy](#) policies in Latin America and Eastern Europe. Then, he turned his attention to global poverty alleviation.

With *The New York Times* bestseller [The End of Poverty](#), Sachs set out an ambitious case to eradicate poverty, arguing that poor nations are stuck in a poverty trap and that increased foreign aid is the key to their escape.

Sachs also served as director of the [UN Millennium Project](#), drafting the [Millennium Development Goals](#) to give clear benchmarks for developing countries so they could track their progress. He is still a special advisor to current UN Secretary-General [Ban Ki-moon](#), overseeing the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

As if that's not enough, he is also director of Columbia University's Earth Institute, looking at ways to ensure that development is accomplished in a sustainable way.

Sachs has twice been named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People, and he writes and appears regularly in mainstream media outlets.

Because he has consistently called for greater collective consciousness of global inequality, we decided to bring him on to "Ethics Matter." And then his latest book came out, and we were really glad we had invited him.

In [The Price of Civilization](#), Jeffrey Sachs grapples with morals and ethics head-on, opening with the strong statement: "At the root of America's economic crisis lies a moral crisis."

Since his book's release, Sachs has gone beyond the usual book tour stops, engaging with the [Occupy Wall Street](#) movement and others, looking for a way to combat inequality here in the States.

We are so glad that he has agreed to sit down and discuss this moral crisis and the ambitious course that he has charted towards what he calls "a more mindful society."

Jeffrey Sachs, welcome to Ethics Matter.

JEFFREY SACHS: Thank you so much.

Remarks

JULIA KENNEDY: So how did you come to the conclusion that our economic crisis is really a moral one?

JEFFREY SACHS: We obviously have a deep economic crisis. The moral crisis is that we are not taking the economic crisis seriously and we are not taking seriously the lives that are impaired, the suffering that is real in this country, and the fact that we have a country that has such wealth, such capacity, but seemingly so little taste to solve problems right now.

I regard that as a moral crisis. So the moral crisis is really the gap between what we can do and what we are doing right now and the lack of seriousness with which we are confronting these problems.

When I hear a candidate in one of these Republican debates sneer "get a job" or "that's your own health problem" or "the Occupy Wall Street people are lazy" or "should take a shower," whatever disgusting thing [Newt Gingrich](#) said recently—he says a lot of them, so I can't keep track of everything that he says—this is a moral lack of seriousness in this country.

This is my most distressing feeling, because I regard America as a great country and a society that has phenomenal capacity, also as a society that has strong values that can be brought to bear to solve our problems. But we are not doing that, and there is a serious disconnect of those who are at the top of power and the top of wealth from the concerns of the rest of society.

Occupy Wall Street has vividly demonstrated this in my view, watching the confusion of people on Wall Street—"What, me? Why are they saying that? What's their problem?"—and so on, which is again a kind of lack of seriousness of engagement. I think that is part of what has been revealed just in recent weeks.

JULIA KENNEDY: So when you went back to tease out these American values, what stood out to you?

JEFFREY SACHS: The good, happy news for me in writing this book was that I not only spoke, of course, to lots and lots of people in different parts of the country, but I also read a lot of opinion surveys and a lot of evidence that political scientists and sociologists have garnered.

I was relieved, I was really relieved, to find the American people are almost nothing like the [Republican presidential candidates](#) [laughter], who are just horrible in their lack of ethical regard. The American people are much more compassionate, much more concerned. They are not the [Tea Party](#), they are not the fringe people laughing and jeering in these debates. This is really a fringe.

Now, it raises lots of political questions. How is it that both our political parties are operating to the right of the center of American values? Very strange, because usually you think about competition between two parties as driving the parties to the center. But I would say both of our political parties operate to the right of center right now. Both of our political parties operate for wealthy campaign contributors and big corporate lobbies.

The American people are just better than that. I was relieved to find that the American people, by roughly a consistent 60 percentage points or more, said that taxes on the rich ought to go up, that the [Bush tax cuts](#) for the top bracket ought to revert to the pre-[Bush](#)-era levels.

You see that it's not the American people putting the politicians to the wall and to the test. It's the politicians making their own choices.

When [Obama](#) signed on to a [two-year continuation](#) of the Bush-era tax cuts, this wasn't because he was under public opinion pressure. Quite the contrary. The public opinion was strongly on the side of eliminating the cuts at the top. This was because of the political gains that even his own party was engaged in, so that he ended up going along with the elite corporate view rather than the mainstream of American values.

Bottom line: we've got enough of good, sensible, pragmatic American values to have this country work, and work well. The most important disconnect is between the mainstream of America and what goes on in Washington right now.

JULIA KENNEDY: Now, how does this look at domestic politics and domestic economic policy connect to your longer career looking at economic policy in the developing world?

JEFFREY SACHS: I think there are a lot of connections.

My first really serious concerns with Washington were about Washington's international posture more than the domestic economy, because I took the view, maybe a little bit too easily, that we would solve our domestic needs—I see extraordinarily poor people all the time abroad, so my attention has been focused on extreme poverty for quite a while.

We've got a lot of it here, not a lot of extreme, extreme poverty, but we have a lot of poverty here that we need

to address. But, somehow, I felt that we could and should be focusing on saving millions of lives, people who are at the threat of death from the extreme deprivation that they face.

Over a period of the last ten to 15 years, I witnessed, of course, repeatedly at the very top a basic lack of concern and lack of engagement of the political class with these realities. And it was more or less bipartisan, though there were always odd aspects to this.

U.S. [development aid](#) as the share of national income reached its lowest point in the postwar period during the [Clinton Administration](#). I would have thought it was a paradox, although it's understandable in a way, it was raised subsequently by George Bush, who was not in any way my favorite president. I would put him near the bottom of the list in fact. But, because of the [religious right](#) that was part of the Republican constituency, he did things that the Clinton Administration didn't do, in fighting [AIDS](#) and in addressing disease control and so on.

But both parties show a very serious lack of interest in these issues. And, generally, right now we are gutting foreign assistance, as if it just couldn't matter how many people die.

I spent a lot of this summer involved with the [extreme drought](#) in the Horn of Africa, which is covering Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, northern Kenya, northern Uganda. It's very grave. It is afflicting 30 to 50 million people. It is claiming many tens of thousands of lives. It threatens millions of lives.

The United States is giving some traditional food aid—that's its automatic response—but beyond that I can't say that there is any attention. I'm one of the world's authorities of what is happening, but there's no interest in Washington in real discussions on these things. The whole focus is on "How do we slash foreign aid? How do we cut the budgets?" Nobody really wants to think about any of these issues.

Sadly, we end up going to war in a lot of these places, throwing [drone](#) missiles into all of these dryland, hungry places because they become unstable, and then we think that we have to fight terrorists there, whereas what we are really observing is the breakdown of societies that are hungry and where populations have grown beyond the ecological carrying capacity of the land.

But it's the lack of seriousness that is so unnerving. You would think it would be a gripping issue. But in all of the meetings that I was involved in this summer—I helped organize the summit meeting in Nairobi in early September; I was at high-level meetings in Rome, where the [Food and Agricultural Organization](#) is based; I had many consultations in the Middle East about these issues—the United States was almost not present at all. It's just incidental.

Maybe [Al-Shabaab](#) was the concern. Maybe something about terrorism. Maybe something about piracy. But about human lives? Well, yes, there are humanitarians—I don't mean to dismiss that—but the attention span is almost nonexistent, and the fulminations against foreign aid in general are just vulgar by people who know nothing, care to know nothing, and absolutely are interested in doing nothing.

And if you don't know, that can be understandable perhaps, because it is hard to know and you have to make an effort to know. If you don't even try, though, that's where I would classify that as immoral behavior. You know enough to know that something serious is going on, but you don't take life seriously enough to make the effort.

Congress is filled with that right now. But the White House is little better, by the way. These issues are just off the back of our politics. Nobody cares.

JULIA KENNEDY: You've long argued that strong, well-funded, independent governmental institutions, whether at the global or the national level, are really key to fighting inequality. So why is that piece so important and why do you find it lacking in so many situations, whether you're looking at domestic policy or international policy?

JEFFREY SACHS: We live and we prosper because we live in a context of technological systems. We barely understand anything about our world, by the way. I know a few engineers who know a lot. Most of us live in a daze.

We don't really know how the airplanes work that we fly. We don't really know how the cell phones work that we rely on. We don't know much. But we live in a system of technology. We couldn't really explain how the vaccines work that save our lives, and so on. Because the levels of specialization of knowledge and so forth are so intricate, this is the wonder of the world that we live in.

When you are interested, if you are interested, in controlling AIDS or malaria or hookworm or addressing very serious, even grave, problems like this, there is a technological system that you need to engage. There are experts who have spent their lives and companies and technologies that are in an extraordinarily sophisticated way able to address these problems.

The problem for the poorest people is mobilizing such systems. It costs money. It costs resources. You need training. You need capacity. You need strategy. This isn't just a vote of goodwill. This is mobilizing a knowledge

and an expert base.

And it's not just only participation in democracy and local knowledge and so forth. We wouldn't like to fly into an airport in Ethiopia, where you're told: "It's really great. They use local knowledge on how airplanes work, and here, when you take off, it's based on indigenous traditions." (Laughter)

The world is not like that. And your mobile phone is not based on a democratic vote; it's based on the quantum physics that underlies the way that the phones work and solid-state electronics works.

We don't have to know all of these things to be able to mobilize good seeds for farmers and disease control and so on. But we do need resources, and we need to be able to build expert systems, and we need to be able to get the job done. That's what I have advocated for many, many years.

It is always a fight. It's always shocking how hard a fight it is. To fight for little money seems to be even harder than to fight for big money. There is no amount so small that we are not willing to dismiss it at the cost of lives.

But when something happens and you make a breakthrough—and for me the past ten years, a lot of it was spent advocating for malaria control. I said the phrase "[insecticide-treated bed net](#)" probably 10,000 times or more. This breakthrough finally happened around 2007. The latest data are that we are saving hundreds of thousands of lives now because basic technology is finally being brought to bear. It wasn't so hard to see that this would work. You needed to talk to trained malariologists and understand the process and the procedures.

The hardest part by far was not doing it. The hardest part by far was convincing people to actually do this and to cut through so many stupid, ignorant, self-serving, naïve, know-nothing excuses for inaction. "Oh, they won't do this, won't use it as bed nets;" "if people are given bed nets, they won't value them"—anything you could make up is made up when it comes to the life-and-death question of poor people.

This is immoral. That's where I use morality again. This is immoral how sloppy the thinking is when lives are at stake.

We wouldn't spend ten minutes with some of these idiocies if it was our own daughter or son spending a day in a village like this. For them we would be up on our dudgeon—"No way my child is going to be even one day in a village if they don't have an insecticide-treated net. Are you crazy?" That's certainly how I would be, and probably how any of us would be.

But when it's a matter of leaving 300 million people without nets forever, no problem. Make it up. "Oh, they're going to turn it into fishing nets; they're going to use it for wedding veils; they're going to not care"—just pure make-believe.

That is, again, the oddest part for me. If we had a serious discussion—"Gee, Professor Sachs, you're right, it's a million people dying. Let's roll up our sleeves, figure out what to do. But I have some doubts. And what about this? What about that?"—and we had an intensive debate, or we tried something here and tried something there, it would be completely different from the lackadaisical way that these issues are actually treated in our lives.

That's what I don't understand. We take a football game on television vastly more seriously than any of these issues. That's a moral confusion.

JULIA KENNEDY: I am curious, though, among other development economists, you're getting into a point of debate in [development economics](#), because some other economists have said, "Well, you do have to engage more with the local communities."

JEFFREY SACHS: I do all the time.

JULIA KENNEDY: No, I'm not accusing you of not engaging.

We had [Bill Easterly](#) here [earlier in the fall](#). He gave the example of a local pump and a development agency had installed it as a carousel [[playpump](#)]. They thought: This is going to be great, because the villagers can get their water, build up their water supply, with the kids playing on the carousel, and it will be more efficient. But what ended up happening was nobody used the carousel for a carousel. So the kids had to push this thing around in order to build up water, and it was work, not play.

So the question is: How can you build in this kind of local sensitivity and make sure you are getting enough feedback to ensure that the implementation is effective?

JEFFREY SACHS: When that idea was told to me, I thought it was absurd. It actually wasn't hard to understand that that was just not a great way to pump water, to build a big carousel. I remember the first time I heard it, and I wanted it to be the last time I heard it.

Bill Easterly went after me in a book, attacking the idea of distributing bed nets, which has been something that I was quite interested in on malaria. How did I know that it was the right thing to do, to distribute bed nets?

Because, working on the ground in umpteen communities, making it my moral and intellectual and professional commitment to really understand malaria in depth—which I do and did, because I took it as a moral commitment as well as a professional commitment—understanding a lot of the practical issues and really burning to solve this problem—not to make up things, but burning to solve this problem—I worked out with malariologists over a number of years a quite effective strategy of how this could be done.

Then I faced relentless attack. That, in a way, is par for the course. But I, again, regarded the attack as by people who hadn't made that effort, frankly, to really understand this and who took it as an academic exercise, where I was trying to fight a disease in real-time. I was seeing children die in front of my eyes and I knew the urgency and the need for practical solutions. And I was working with some of the world's top malariologists.

We finally made a breakthrough to get those bed nets out. And, as I said, the evidence is that malaria deaths compared to the base line are down probably somewhere around 40 percent in sub-Saharan Africa right now. And the numbers could go farther if the recommendations I am making about community health workers and other things are actually heeded.

In 2010, a randomized study was done of giving bed nets versus selling bed nets. That showed that the approach I had been advocating for a decade was absolutely right. Then, a number of academics said: "Oh, okay, now I get it. We should give the bed nets."

Interestingly—I'm glad that that was done—here was another route to knowledge, and a very practical one if you were really interested in solving the problem and saw it as a burning issue, not as an occasion for doing another study, frankly.

Bill Easterly came around several years later—not to me, but he then wrote some pieces saying: "You know, he'd been to a community, and they needed the bed nets, and maybe people should be given those bed nets"—which is fair enough. You are allowed to learn and you need to learn on the process.

Again, I'm going to make the point—and I can only convey a feeling and an experience. For those who were in the front lines of fighting this disease, and putting aside all the donor politics and the gobbledygook that consumed it, there was a lot of knowledge about what to do. And there was a sense of urgency, because it's a horrible disease, and children die right and left if it's not controlled.

If you take it as a moral issue, which I do—meaning that there is a seriousness of one's life to get the right answers—I think we could have arrived at the right answer many years earlier.

That's my point. There are many ways to knowledge. There are many ways to understand what to do. I bring a lot of informal knowledge, because it's experience, it's putting together information from 30 years of working on these issues. People want to see it as a test rather than what I say—"Why should we listen to him?" and so forth—even though one of the ways to knowledge is experience, having done this for a long time.

But, however one treats it, it's the sense of urgency that I think is completely missing from a lot of this discussion, and certainly from our attitude in the world.

I can tell you, if I write a blog, even on a "liberal" website, half the responses to a recommendation of foreign aid will be a blistering attack—"Let 'em die. Why should we give a damn? We have our own problems. Not our fault." Really ugly stuff, by the way.

I actually don't believe that's how most Americans are. I believe that it's a kind of vulgarity of our anonymity on websites and the blogs. But it also reflects, again, the opinion-setters in this country, who are the people that we see on the cable news shows or that we hear on the radio or that we see in the leadership do an absolutely miserable job of this.

I once said to President Obama early in the term—I explained the situation of extreme hunger in the Horn of Africa and how we needed to do more and so on. He dismissed it, frankly. He said, "Find me another hundred votes in Congress."

I was stunned, I have to say, because that's his job actually. My job is to explain why it's so serious and technically what can be done about it. His job is to find the hundred votes in Congress.

But the moral seriousness says that's really his job. His job is not to listen to [David Plouffe](#) or [Rahm Emanuel](#), who are two master cynics, tell him, "Don't get there. No one cares about that. That's bad politics." His job as president of the United States is to tell them, "Shut up. I'm president of the United States. Lives are at stake. It's my responsibility." He doesn't do that. That to my mind is a moral issue again. But—it's something about the

milieu that we are living in—it's not seen this way at all.

I can't stand these political advisors, by the way. They're the worst breed. It's a profession we absolutely don't need at all. I think our politicians are probably more decent than their political advisors, because their political advisors are cold, calculating—that's their job.

They are interested in one thing, which is reelection, which is at the bottom of my list of interests, and I think it should be the bottom of our list of interests. Who cares whether they are reelected? We care what they do, not what their games are. The world is not organized for their reelection. If they do a good job, they will get reelected. But not to be manipulated this way.

And yet, this is really so odd. When is the last time you heard a single congressman or senator or the president stand up and say any of the issues we are talking about right now is really important for the American people? You don't hear it.

JULIA KENNEDY: I have two quick questions, and then I am eager to throw it open to the audience.

One is we've talked about the need for funding for foreign aid. We are also talking about the need to raise revenue to balance the budget here at home.

So can you talk a little bit about what you recommend? In your book you give extremely specific recommendations about how this gap can be closed. Can you just go through that briefly for us here?

JEFFREY SACHS: Sure.

Basically, we are the lowest taxed country of any high-income democracy right now. Our total tax collections, federal, state, and local, are probably this year 27 percent of GNP or 28 percent of GNP. The countries that I most admire in how they manage themselves are the Scandinavian countries—Sweden, Norway, Denmark; also I would add Finland, the Netherlands. They tax themselves at about 45 percent of GNP. It's a huge difference.

The difference is that they have the idea that they should run a quality government that provides inclusive social services for the whole society, that ensures security, that ensures a child, wherever they are in any of these countries, whatever their family circumstances, will have a safe childbirth, good nutrition, safe preschool, early childhood development, cognitive development, quality public schools, and the ability to get a higher education if they make their way to this.

They care about the environment. They care about climate change.

They care about the rest of the world. All of these countries spend 1 percent of their national income on the rest of the world. We spend right now about one-fifth or less than that. We spend 30 times more on the military than on the development aid, because we are willing to spend anything, it seems, to have more missiles, to have more hard power. But we are not ready to spend on our own poor, even our middle class at this point, and certainly not the world's poor.

So we don't tax ourselves, and we are told repeatedly that the only way to a good life and prosperity is to keep the hedge fund managers paying a maximum rate of 15 percent and long-term capital gains at 15 percent, and on and on.

What we are ending up with is a complete inability to pay for civilization. This is the choice we are making. We are gutting government actually. Whether the [Super Committee](#) agrees or doesn't agree, there is so little funding for education, environment, energy, infrastructure, that it's almost as if we don't have these programs now. Science and technology is about to be slashed.

The whole leadership legacy of this country is being torn down now by very ignorant and very aggressive people who think that the highest calling is [Grover Norquist's anti-tax pledge](#). It's a vulgarity and it's a danger.

So I am advocating, of course, several percent of GNP more in taxation. I am advocating that the top 1 percent pay roughly two percentage points at least more of national income in taxes, one in personal income taxes. I want to get rid of the low [capital gains tax](#). I want to get rid of the [carried interest](#).

I want to raise the top marginal tax rates. I would introduce a [net worth tax](#) for, what I propose in the book, wealth above \$5 million net worth, starting at that level to tax it at 1 percent, which would collect about 1 percent of GNP.

There are yachts 200 feet, 400 feet, sitting in Newport that never get used, that are there just for show, because people have more money than they know what to do with at the very top.

That's the game. But what kind of game is this, when we have reached the situation that we are in right now?

When I do the calculations, I don't think we are going to reach Scandinavian levels of taxation and social services—I'm not that naïve. But I know that we are broken where we are right now.

I'll just give you one illustration. There is a category that I find very important, called the non-security discretionary budget. That is the part of our budget that pays for education, labor market policy including job training; the environment, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), the [federal lands](#), our science programs, our [NASA](#), the judicial system, agriculture, commerce—and I know that I'm forgetting a few more. All of that—that's a lot by the way—infrastructure, our roads, our inland waterways, our ports, our dams, our levies.

You know, all of those categories are on track right now for the total spending of the federal government in all of those areas—now I'm going to say it again: education, primary, secondary, tertiary level; all of infrastructure; all of science and technology; all of environmental protection; energy systems; labor markets; judiciary—do you know, we're on track for all of that spending to be less than 2 percent of our national income by the end of this decade?

We're closing down our government. We are closing down the federal government. What the federal government will be at the end of this decade, by agreement reached in August, is the military, [Social Security](#), [Medicare](#), [Medicaid](#), veterans' benefits, food stamps, unemployment compensation, interest on the debt. That's basically all there will be.

Everything else—foreign aid basically gone; diplomacy basically gone. The things that are for the quality of our lives, like education or science, we're slashing those right now. We are squeezing everything into insignificance so that very, very rich people supposedly are benefited so that they can keep their income—though countless rich people don't want this at all.

I was with the [Patriotic Millionaires](#) testifying in Congress last week. I wasn't one of them. I was an economist. They were the millionaires. They were saying: "Tax us. Are you kidding? We want a normal country. Our kids live here. Our kids grow up here. They are going to breathe the same air. They are facing climate change. You can't keep the climate out of the gated communities. So what good is Southampton if the water level is another five meters and the storm surges and the hurricanes are coming because of climate change? What are these people thinking? Honest to god!"

But that's where we are. So my basic answer is we've got to pay for civilization, which is what the book title is.

Obviously it is taking off of [Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.](#)'s, statement when he said, "I like to pay taxes. That's the way I pay for civilization." We used to believe this. We used to have a sense of civic virtue at the top.

JULIA KENNEDY: You've spoken out in support of Occupy Wall Street, spoken at Zuccotti Park when there were demonstrations there. Obviously, that's a group of people that have really devoted a lot of time and effort to speaking out about issues in our society.

I'm curious what you think the majority of Americans can do on the individual level to move towards the mindful society that you are envisioning.

JEFFREY SACHS: I think at the most personal level my main recommendation to Americans is turn off the TV more and get out and get a life a little bit more, because we are watching too much TV and we're imbibing too much corporate propaganda in the midst of it.

But as a society, Americans know that something is deeply wrong. It's not that we are at all happy with this. And they even sense what is wrong, by the way. So it's also not as if this is a complete mystery. Americans probably agree on the proposition that our government is in the hands of special interests more than they agree on anything else.

Americans want to tax the rich. They're right on that. Many rich share that sentiment.

Americans want to end [these wars](#), which have been a complete disaster. Americans want to cut the military budget, and they are absolutely right to want to cut that—because why we need to be maintaining military bases to defend against the Soviet invasion beats me, 20 years after the [end of the Soviet Union](#), why we need hundreds of military bases around the world, why we think we are getting security in the Middle East by desperately trying to keep bases here or there in the Middle East.

Americans know these things, but they can't turn their sentiment into decisions right now because we are in the hands of big lobbies right now that are more powerful and that call the shots.

So I think what we need is not only social awareness, but we need political change. The normal way to do this would be to get money out of the campaigns. But we can't do that because, first, the politicians won't do it, and second, even if they would do it, the Supreme Court in its jurisprudential wisdom can't tell the difference of

anonymous corporate giving and free speech. It's pathetic. We have even completely wrecked the Supreme Court by this extreme right-wing corporate influence.

So we are going to have to figure out a different way if we are going to grab this back. My proposal and my hypothesis is that in our socially networked world it will be possible to win political power without big campaign donations if those who want to do that are prepared as a kind of—how should I call it? I was going to say "a social media sentinel" or "a social media militia," but that's not what I really want to say.

What I do want to say is a nationwide network that is ready to tweet and re-tweet and friend and virally feed YouTubes and do all the things that are needed for people to get free media time, free exposure, free awareness, free knowledge, to defeat those who think that paying the big bills and brainwashing us through the paid TV ads, is the only way to go.

And so what I really want to do is see if we can organize a way to beat the big money at its own game but without the big money.

In my view, the most effective—I haven't asked David Plouffe this—my feeling is that the most effective single moment of the [Obama 2008 campaign](#) was the "Yes We Can" viral video of [Will.i.am](#), which was completely riveting and had millions of viewers. I watched my kids watch it 50 times each. I probably only watched it 30 times. I enjoyed showing it to everybody. It was gripping.

You know, I was so excited about Obama also. A lot of that was the free media. It showed what to do.

Now, what we didn't know at the time was that that was half his campaign. The other half was on Wall Street and the other half was big bundlers, big money, big influence, that came right into the White House with him on the first day and made, in my view, a mess of his [administration](#). He did, but so did the aides that he brought in.

But it shows—at least my hypothesis is—you don't need a billion dollars to run a presidential campaign. What you need is a mass true following on social networks.

I have made the recommendation that candidates take a maximum of \$99 per donor. If you are running for president, you can probably get a million such donations. That is \$99 million, which is enough to pay for the gas fare, to cover your airplane travel, and your other things.

But you don't need big bundlers, you don't need [PACs](#) [political action committees], you don't need super PACs. You need the American people engaged.

So I am looking forward to some candidates that stand up and say, "We're not taking corporate money. We're just out there. We want to run so that we're not bought."

I think that's going to be highly effective. I'm talking to a lot of people about how to organize a national effort so that candidates that want to run on that basis are going to have an automatic base of millions of supporters who are going to be aware of them and know about them and to build that base.

I liken it to a kind of 21st-century [Progressive Era](#). The early-20th-century Progressive Era was how we handled the first [Gilded Age](#).

Of course, our greatest success in this country was two great presidents who were really smart, really rich, and really tough: [Teddy Roosevelt](#) and [Franklin Roosevelt](#). They knew the class they came from and they knew its limits and they put it in its place. They said, "We're rich, we're powerful, and we're siding with the common people." That's a huge plus.

But we've got to win that election. If we can't win it in 2012, we have to win it in 2016.

JULIA KENNEDY: Well, they're very interesting comments. Thank you so much.

I'm afraid I monopolized you a little bit, so we just have a little time for questions.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson.

Thank you kindly for your very wise analysis and recommendations. They're a little sobering. We are reaching toward Thanksgiving, so I wondered whether you could be positive.

You've been so central in the Millennium Development Goals, in recommendations, in starting up all kinds of activities within developing countries where local people are empowered to take initiatives and carry on the good work. Could you give us some examples of how this has been effective, the difference that it's making?

JEFFREY SACHS: Wonderful. Thank you.

You know, the world did something unusual and amazing 11 years ago, and that was that it decided to take on goals to fight poverty, hunger, and disease in these eight Millennium Development Goals. It set quantitative targets and set it for 2015.

I'm absolutely convinced that most of the politicians on that day at the UN—a wonderful picture of about 160 world leaders spread out there—thought they would never hear of this again, that it was a photo op, and that like most UN meetings, that was a photo op and that would be the end of it.

We've gotten at least a little revenge, in that, 11 years on, we are talking about this and the Millennium Development Goals are very much alive.

They are very much organized in principles for lots of governments, and civil society all over the world is holding governments to account—"What are you doing about [child mortality](#)? What are you doing about [maternal mortality](#)? What are you doing about hunger?" So this is a real and positive dynamic.

I have already mentioned that malaria is one of the key targets of the Millennium Development Goals—MDG 6, to control communicable diseases—and we have seen an incredible breakthrough. People are alive by the millions now, if you cumulate children growing up healthier, because of this.

We are seeing farmers grow more food because of the ability to use [higher-yield varieties](#) and more scientific approaches for the first time.

One of the most amazing things that is not really because of the Millennium Development Goals per se but it has empowered them, is that six years ago, when we began a project called [Millennium Villages](#) as part of this effort, I went to ten countries, to specific rural areas, and there wasn't a telephone in any of these areas. These were not only poor villages, but they were essentially isolated villages. Now if you go back to any of them, probably a third of the people have mobile phones and there is no sense of isolation anymore anywhere. Basically, isolation has ended in the world.

It can lead to instability. People are finding out, "Hey, whoa, look at us! This is a problem." So I think that you even get unrest as people are aware more of the realities in which they are living.

But poverty and isolation are kind of in a bear hug together, and if you break isolation, you break poverty also, because all of a sudden farmers can call a market, they can get an input, they can call for an emergency supply, they can offload their product before it rots. I am seeing this kind of on-the-ground transformation taking place in absolutely phenomenal ways, even in very remote, areas.

I am also seeing, by the way, lots of countries step in to the breach left by the United States and by other donors that have dropped off.

I was in Korea last month. Korea is becoming a significant donor country. I was at a mega-church in Korea, in Seoul, where this church has taken on building a huge hospital complex in Addis Ababa that we will also work with to help be the center for national training of health workers and health managers and so forth.

That is just an example of something around the world, that there is a tremendous spread of ideas, knowledge, engagement, community development. So I am by no means pessimistic at all. On balance, I am seeing a lot of wind in the sails.

I wrote this book about America because I am concerned about this country and what has happened to it. I love the fact that when I started my career I was an American and had the wind in the sails, because I knew that America was out there to solve the problems.

And Americans are still out there, by the way. Our kids in the schools, in universities, all over the country are organized. They are doing wonderful things. They are doing amazing things.

But what has dropped off is what we talked about for a while, and that is the official, the formal, the representation of the United States in this process. But that shouldn't cloud the overall positive aspects, which you absolutely rightly recognized, and which is a reality on the ground in all parts of the world.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Dr. Sachs. I want to congratulate you. I am from Canada. My name is John Parisella. I would hope my country would welcome your message because it is certainly very inspiring.

I'd like to ask you—because I am enjoying very much your transition to commenting on domestic politics in recent months—where do you see the Occupy Wall Street movement going in light of the recent events?

JEFFREY SACHS: I wrote a piece in *The New York Times* last weekend, called "[The New Progressive Movement](#)." Of course it's a mix of prediction and hope, in that I do regard the Progressive Era as the right role model.

The Progressive Era lasted from around 1892, which is the traditional date that historians give, to 1917. It's about 25 years actually. Two great presidents were quintessential Progressive figures, Teddy Roosevelt and [Woodrow Wilson](#).

Then came [World War I](#). Then came the [free-for-all of the 1920s](#) once again, with [Harding](#), [Coolidge](#), and [Hoover](#), which was a kind of a second Gilded Age. It ended in a [financial crash](#), of course. Then came what you could call a second Progressive Era, with the [New Deal](#) and Franklin Roosevelt, who I regard as America's greatest president in history.

We are in a third Gilded Age right now. We have been in it roughly for 30 years, since [Ronald Reagan](#) came to office. He set a course that, in a famous statement, "Government is not the solution to our problems, government is the problem." An anti-government president is a disaster. If you are really against government, don't be president. [Laughter] We need presidents who believe in government for problem solving, actually. This was really a unique reversal, and a very devastating one. It really has changed direction for a long time.

But I am with the wisdom of [Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.](#), the late great American historian, who said that America moves in waves between the private purpose and the public purpose in roughly 30-year intervals. I do see us at the end of the Reagan era.

I feel we're exactly in the moment in [The Wizard of Oz](#) when the curtain has been pulled away and you see [Lloyd Blankfein](#) moving the dials, and you find out that he actually gamed the toxic assets—"We're doing God's work." He is still speaking into the microphone, but everybody is watching now.

I think we're at the end of this period. I do expect a new era.

I think we are at the end of the [Rupert Murdoch](#) era because, again, lawlessness, recklessness, greed will bring him down because of [massive criminality](#) in the UK.

So I do think it's a change of direction. But I am very cognizant of the fact that the Progressive Era was 25 years, and people are saying, by the way, "You know, Occupy Wall Street is so confused. What do they want? It's leaderless."

Do you realize that it started September 17? This is two months. It has changed the discourse of this country. Absolutely amazing! Amazing from a public fever point of view, because it's not all that many people, but it hits so close to home and it resonates, and there is absolute deep truth in the message. "[We are the 99 percent](#)," which is the essence of the message—"something is wrong with the impunity at the top" is the message.

It has just led to a panic—police with batons, police with pepper spray. You know, even one little park they can't leave to these kids. But that's a sign of how ill at ease the powers-that-be really are right now. You think of Zuccotti Park. It's a tiny little park. They couldn't even leave that well enough alone, just to have a cold winter. They had to call the police in.

They had to do that in [Oakland](#). They had this completely disgusting [event in UC Davis](#) yesterday, which everybody should look at, if you haven't seen it on the Internet. It's also telling, because the ease with which people in authority lie is so great that the police chief idiot who lost his job today, deservedly so, said, "We were surrounded." That's why they did it.

They don't know there are 50 cameras watching everything now and they're all on YouTube, because they're too old maybe, they don't watch YouTube, or too stupid, or too used to lying, or too used to impunity, to know that it is going to be proved false within ten minutes, which this one was.

So what is a new progressive movement in this country?

- It is, first, social awareness. That's number one.
- Second, it is organized, smart activism. I want [shareholder activism](#), for example, where we get shares of companies and go to the general meetings and put in proxy contests and call for companies to stop anonymous campaign giving with shareholder money, which is obnoxious from the point of view of the shareholders as well as from the point of view of the political system. I think that shareholder activism can play a real role here. But it hasn't even started yet.
- I would like a policy platform. I've made a number of recommendations, but there are going to be better ones and new ones. We need, I believe, the platform that is really around three components, and that is end the wars, tax the rich, and make government effective again. I think that those are really the three

prongs of a true progressive movement.

- And then, there is the fight for political power. That is, at least my thought, can you jujitsu this system so that you can compete without big money? If you can't, I don't have a good solution. That's really the question: Can you reach enough people now who are disgusted by how our politics really works—because they are disgusted, but can you reach them?

Because it's so noisy, this environment, it's really hard to reach people in America. You get your quick sound bite, then you move on to the basketball score, and then you move on to [Kim Kardashian](#), then you move on to this, then you move on to this.

Everybody's got a ten-second attention span. The ones that win are the ones that have the megaphone. The megaphone costs money. Right now it's people with money and corporations with money, and especially the Murdochs and the [David Coates](#) with the money that win the public debate. It's not debate; it's whoever can say it most wins. It's a constant drumbeat of repetition.

We need another way. That's what I believe the free media makes possible. That's a hypothesis and that's what I want to see if we can do.

QUESTION: My name is Stephan Said. I'm an Iraqi-American singer who helped both ignite the [Arab Spring](#) and Occupy movement. Thank you so much for your candor, which I think probably everybody here appreciates.

So many things that you have brought up have led me to want to ask you a question.

That is, I have been in conversations with folks that started the [April 6th Movement](#) today on the phone, folks in Athens as well as many of the people I worked with to ignite Wall Street, about releasing a big song coming up to unite people around a central theme, very much so we can create or give to this generation something like the [civil rights movement](#) had.

If we were going to boil this down, it would be that this is an international movement for a more equitable global society, which all humanity has dreamt of forever but never achieved—but the vision is the question, that it's so high and lofty that it really can cross borders from conservatives to progressives and be undeniable, behind which we can really mobilize our nonviolence with dignity.

My question is: If you could, do you see that as being a possibility right now, because we are discussing it? And, if you could, what would that vision be, what would it look like to you?

JEFFREY SACHS: I think one of the most exciting things we can do—and it sounds like you are in a great place to help do it—is to bring together electronically, by video, by virtual, as well as in person, young leaders around the world who each in their own societies are fighting for the basic principles of freedom, justice, equality, which are age-old ideals but which need to be renovated each generation.

I have met a lot of the youth leaders of [Tahrir Square](#), which is in a desperate struggle right now, and I have met a lot of the youth leaders in [Tunis](#).

I love the fact how odd it is that this time the movement went from Cairo to Tel Aviv. That's also an incredible sign. Israel had one of the biggest [protests](#) in the world, maybe the biggest as a share of society, about inequality, injustice. Quite interesting, by the way, because the macroeconomics of Israel were not bad, but the microeconomics of the incredible concentration of wealth among a small group and the inequalities of income were enough to ignite the whole society.

I love the fact that a lot of the Tel Aviv movement came from Cairo. What a wonderful possibility, by the way, of joining forces.

Then I was in Santiago in Chile last month. Of course the students there have been [demonstrating](#), not coincidentally, because Chile is again a well-managed country and a recovering country from [Pinochet](#) and it has a real democracy, but it has huge inequality of income. So students are basically saying, "We can't make it through our society with these inequalities."

So we are seeing a global response to a global phenomenon actually, because everywhere politics, money, big interests coalesced and lost track in the last 30 years of what counts.

While in the final moment the United States told [Mubarak](#) he has to leave, the United States was the big supporter of course for 30 years beforehand. We didn't much care about any of these issues until the final moment, then tried to step in front of this—we being the U.S. government, is what I mean to say.

So I think that students everywhere really are onto something big and important. I do think each society faces its

own specific issues and ways of framing things, but I think the idea of the new generation creating a better world because they now have the means and it's a globally networked society and it's a networked society that is after openness, democracy, legitimacy, fairness, economic justice, and [environmental sustainability](#)—which is really going to be the drama of these young people in 10, 15, 20 years.

They don't know it now, but that is going to become the compelling first-order danger that our kids are going to face in 20 years from now. We see it in the Horn of Africa, but this is going to become much more urgent.

Making that global society I think is absolutely crucial and extremely powerful. That's why, again, I really believe in the social networks and that technology has made possible globalization in a lot of ways. Technology also gives us tools to bring globalization under democratic control again, because we really can create networks that are big and broad.

I videoconference with students in Tunis or in Cairo or elsewhere just like that [snapping fingers], because of course you just [Skype](#) in the address and all of a sudden you are in a world environment. That is, I think, what we should make clear in this movement also. Everyone's got local issues but everyone really is joined. That gives a lot of power and a lot of sense about building a new world.

I'm proud that the last chapter of my book is called "The [Millennials](#)." It was well before Occupy Wall Street, but it was saying that young people really are going to be the agents of change.

I wish I could say it about my own generation. I am on the tail end of the [Baby Boomers](#). But this is the generation that got lazy, sloppy, forgot basic ethics, and really essentially misbehaved in the end. I think young people in the end have the chance to revitalize all of that. Thank you for what you are doing. [Applause]

JULIA KENNEDY: Thank you all so much for coming. Thank you so much.

JEFFREY SACHS: Thanks.

JULIA KENNEDY: That was really inspiring.

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