

2010 10 06 Conference of Nobel Laureates Plenary Conversation

Elie Wiesel with David Axelrod

DAVID AXELROD: (applause) It's as if they know you. (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: They should. (laughter)

M1: We do, we do.

F1: And we love you.

ELIE WIESEL: (laughs) That's you. (laughter) Well, David, you know that for more than 40 years, four times a year, I am on this stage alone. So for the first time, I share it with you.

DAVID AXELROD: Well, I'm honored. I'm honored.

ELIE WIESEL: (laughs) And it's my pleasure. We met on a historic day. The inauguration of the President. And I think that meeting was good, it was a moment. [00:01:00] A good moment in our lives. And we became friends. Today, we had a long day -- we called it a Nobel meeting, the Nobel laureates -- and we spent the whole day, actually, just asking questions, trying to answer them. And my very first question, actually, I asked already last night at the opening dinner. I asked every one of them to tell me -- tell us -- what worries them, what preoccupies them, what pains them most these days. I'm asking you. What pains

you, what worries you, what preoccupies you most these days?

DAVID AXELROD: How much time do we have? (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: We have (laughs) until midnight. (laughter)

DAVID AXELROD: Well, before I answer that, let me just say what an honor it is to [00:02:00] share a stage with you, and one of the great benefits of the job I have is that I have the opportunity to meet some extraordinary people, but none more extraordinary than you, and someone who I grew up revering from afar, and it's always a wonderful thing when people you idolize from afar turn out to be exactly who you hope they'll be. And so, it's a great honor to be here with you. Well, you know, we have -- let me talk about the country. We have tremendous challenges in our country today. We've gone through an upheaval that has wreaked havoc on the lives of so many people, [00:03:00] and dispirited so many people. People have lost their jobs, lost their homes. People have lost their dreams. We've come back some, but the damage was very, very severe, and so there's -- one piece is, how do we regenerate an economy in a way that not just folks at the top, but everyone can participate? That these big gaps, and this growing gap of inequality gets closed, and that great American sense of opportunity is restored, that if you work hard and do the

right things, that you can get ahead. If you have a good idea, you can get ahead. People have begun to doubt that to some degree, and that's something we have to restore, and it goes to, sort of, the soul of our country, as -- that sense of -- that sort of [00:04:00] sourness is something that is understandable in these kind of times, but -- you know, I think one of our great missions is to regenerate that sense of possibility that has so characterized the spirit of our country, and I think that's something the president spends a lot of time thinking about, even as he thinks about the kind of fundamental things we have to do to get the economy moving again. And then, the second thing I am concerned about -- and I know that you have spoken and written a lot about this -- is the sense of divisiveness that I sense in our politics, and that we see playing out on our TV screens, and in our communities, and, you know, that is, I think -- and I'm probably leading into my question of you, but it seems to me that that is an outgrowth or a function, to some degree, of difficult economic times. [00:05:00] I think it lends itself to that kind of thing. We've seen in our history and in the history of other countries, sometimes in tragic ways, what happens when there is a sense of economic distress, and how it divides people. So, those are the two

things that worry me. Now, look, globally, there are plenty of worries, and you and I have talked about them -- the threat of terrorism, we've talked about Iran. You know, there are issues like climate change, which is an ongoing challenge. There's poverty and deprivation and all of those things. But I think the world needs a strong, vibrant America, and so what I'm interested in is seeing to it that we do what we can to lay the foundation for that [00:06:00] strong, vibrant future, and I think that's what the president's focused on as well.

ELIE WIESEL: Just to explain to the audience, this is not a question and answer. What we wanted to do tonight is a conversation between two friends, and therefore, we decided, I will ask David a question, and then he can ask me a question. Your turn.

DAVID AXELROD: Well, my question goes to -- as I said, you've spoken on the subject of incivility -- incivility in our politics, incivility in our media. To what do you attribute that? How does it compare to what you've seen before, and what do you think the path is to overcome that?

ELIE WIESEL: I am worried, and at times, outraged, by the incivility in this campaign. It's not new. In the last campaigns, had all kinds of falsedoms. [00:07:00] But this time, when there are, I hear, more than 20 million people

who listen to certain political commentators, so to speak,
the way -- the extreme --

DAVID AXELROD: -- the "so to speak" is important there.

ELIE WIESEL: (laughs) The way they -- the language they use,
my God. When they compare -- some of them compare the
President Obama to Hitler -- how far, really, can indecency
go? I understand controversy, really -- (applause) I
understand diversity. I understand even adversity. Of
course. Political adversaries. But there is hatred. Why
such hatred? So if I were -- I said, actually, last night,
to my fellow laureates, what worries me, what pains me, is
fanaticism. [00:08:00] I have been warning already for
years and years against the growth of fanaticism. Because
fanaticism, I said then, to a fanatic, is something like to
a blind man. To a blind man, God is blind. To a fanatic,
who worships hatred, and death, as suicide terrorists do,
God is a God of hatred and death. And in this campaign,
there is already a new political fanaticism which I believe
is dangerous and unworthy of whatever is noble in the
American tradition.

DAVID AXELROD: You know, the president gave a speech at the
University of Michigan, a commencement speech, earlier in
this year, and he addressed this issue of civility, and he
said a few things that I thought were interesting and

important in this regard. [00:09:00] The first is that these -- the language that has become commonplace in our discourse, where we -- not only do we not -- not only can we disagree -- and disagreement is part of democracy. We have a long history of disagreement, sometimes vehement. In fact, I should say as an aside that, you know, people believe that this sort of mean-spiritedness is new. It's not new, it's -- I said to a group last night, I was saying before we came in, I had the kind of improbable experience of being asked to pinch-hit for Rahm Emanuel at a forum on civility and politics. (laughter) And I recounted the fact that, you know, if you go back through the campaigns in history, there were personal attacks, [00:10:00] you know, in 1824, when Andrew Jackson ran for president against John Quincy Adams, there was a pamphlet distributed called A Catalogue of the Youthful Indiscretions of Andrew Jackson from Ages 13-57. (laughter) You know, the things that were said about Thomas Jefferson were more than slanderous. But what there wasn't -- there wasn't a delegitimization of them as Americans, in most cases. And so what you see in our discourse now -- and it's not all limited to the right, I mean, but there's a penchant for characterizing people as, you know, socialists, as fascists, as you mention, even invoking Hitler. Just, extreme language. And what the

president said at the University of Michigan is, once you start using that kind of language, you make it impossible for people [00:11:00] to reach a compromise, any kind of compromise. You basically exclude the possibility of civil discourse when you try and delegitimize your opponents. And we've seen too much of that. The second thing he said that I think is important and instructive is, we are now in certain ways returning to a time in our history more like the early 20th century, when we had newspapers that represented just one point of view, and people read that newspaper because it affirmed their point of view. Now we have cable stations that represent a point of view. We have internet sites that affirm a point of view. And so, whereas we all used to sit around the television and watch Walter Cronkite, or Huntley and Brinkley, now, [00:12:00] people are dividing up into corners and the only information they're getting is information that affirms their view, and often it's overheated in ways that encourage the kind of intemperate language that we've seen. And so, it has the effect of polarizing our politics, polarizing people, and it also has affected the way the mainstream media covers public affairs, because -- and Bob Schieffer was the moderator last night, and I said, you know, the fact is that you guys -- if Fox News puts up a

story and it creates a political contretemps, you guys feel the obligation to cover the contretemps, and even though you may know that the story itself was not valid, you cover it because you say, "Well, it's affecting the political debates, so we have to cover it." And in that way, you end up extending the reach of what should not be part of the discourse. [00:13:00] So, we've got a lot of work to do, and I think that, you know, the elections this year -- I believe that the Democratic Party will do better in November than people believe, and I believe the Democratic Party will remain in control of the House and the Senate, but there's no question that there's going to be a more closely divided Congress, more Republicans and Democrats. We've seen for the last 20 months an unwillingness to compromise, egged on by the kind of discourse that you're talking about. The big test after November is whether people are going to accept a sense of responsibility on both sides to move the country forward, and we're eager to do that, but the environment is working against that, and that's a big concern.

ELIE WIESEL: To me, there's a lot to do for educators. We must educate society once more, to respect language.

[00:14:00] We have the feeling that language itself has been demeaned, victimized, distorted, perverted. And we

must really start again, and tell our readers, our listeners, and our friends that language is here to bring people upwards. To pull them up, rather than pull them down. To unite them, rather than to divide them. It's all language. Culture means language, as a language of behavior, a language of ideas, a language of hope. And we have to start almost all over again. But it's for you to ask me a question.

DAVID AXELROD: Well, I actually, I glommed on to your last question, and gave a long answer to my own question of you, and then hogged the microphone, and hogged on to yours. Talk to me a little bit about religious tolerance. You know, my -- [00:15:00] I'm the son of an immigrant. We talked about this before, my father came from Eastern Europe during the pogroms. He was quite young, and his home was destroyed by a bomb, and his family fled, and it took them four years to get to America, but they knew they wanted to come here because they thought of America as a place of tolerance, of religious tolerance. They knew that that was part of our tradition. It doesn't feel like people are as tolerant right now, and I'm interested to know what your thoughts are on that.

ELIE WIESEL: I'm afraid that fanaticism is like a black plague. It's contagious. And if I'm so worried, is that

it's growing, in many, many quarters, not only in one religion. And what to do about it? Of course, as a Jew, I've been saying it [00:16:00] and repeating it -- I do not believe that we Jews are better than others, nor are we inferior. I simply believe that as Jews, we can attain universality. I don't think I have to give up my Jewishness in order to preach and educate that universality. But I say the Christian, the Buddhist, the Muslim, have -- they have the same right, and duty, perhaps, to say that. Now, there was an ecumenic movement. It was a good movement. Actually, created by John XXIII, and then helped by John Paul II. And, there were many, many, many efforts made in that direction. Rabbis and priests would meet, in many, many cities and communities, working together, signing petitions, for good causes. Unfortunately, [00:17:00] they forgot their third partner - - I think they should have also taken in a Muslim. An imam, or a qadi, and studied together. Just studied together, every week or every month, study ancient text. Study never separates people. So, today, unfortunately, fanaticism is growing. And tolerance -- excuse me, is something that belongs to the books, but not to behavior. So we have to do -- the task before us is tremendous. To show respect. Respect for the otherness of the other.

DAVID AXELROD: Let me -- I know it's my turn to answer a question, but let me ask you another --

ELIE WIESEL: Of course.

DAVID AXELROD: -- because I think folks, I think, will gain more wisdom from you than me. (applause) You don't have to agree so readily. [00:18:00] (laughter) It's hard to show humility, so help me here. (laughter) But, here in the -- you know, the city itself has been a fulcrum of some of this debate, because of the extraordinary tragedy that occurred here on 9/11, and it's played out with the controversy over the mosque, and so on. And I haven't had a chance to talk to you about that. I'm eager to hear your --

ELIE WIESEL: -- Busy with the President.

DAVID AXELROD: (laughs) Well, we all probably could benefit from your insights on this.

ELIE WIESEL: David, I did not participate publicly in it, I'll tell you, because, somehow, nobody even asked me. No. But we discuss it a lot, Marion and I, and my foundation.

[00:19:00] I have, actually, an idea. I have a solution. It's rare. I usually have good questions, but this time, I have a solution. And my idea was, actually, to publish an appeal to the imam, and tell him, look -- excuse me -- I respect every person. I respect you, or what you want to

do. You are religious. I respect religious people. And I know that your intentions are good. But you must admit that the intentions were good, but in doing so, you are hurting some people who suffered. And I know the law is on your side. The Constitution is on your side. And I am a fervent believer in the American Constitution. To me, it's a sacred document. So, what I would suggest, rather than what you said -- you want to create a Muslim center open to interfaith -- just turn it around. Let's do it together. [00:20:00] Jews, Christians, and Muslims, together, will create this place, this center for interfaith. But, sponsored together, financed together, worked out programs together, and show a symbol, an effort of solidarity, religious solidarity, rather than create divisions. And I hope he will accept it, and then we will do it. It can become a very great symbol here, a great monument for humanity.

DAVID AXELROD: Is this the first -- (applause) -- so no one's asked you this before?

ELIE WIESEL: No one.

DAVID AXELROD: That was a mistake. (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: Luckily, you are here.

DAVID AXELROD: That sounds like a wonderful idea.

ELIE WIESEL: I think so. (laughter) Occasionally, I have some. (laughs)

DAVID AXELROD: Yes, I know. (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: (laughs)

DAVID AXELROD: I know. Or maybe this'll turn out to be a historic conversation.

ELIE WIESEL: [00:21:00] It is anyway. (applause)

DAVID AXELROD: Okay, now it's your turn.

ELIE WIESEL: My turn. Tell me, to be so close to the president gives you, for better or for worse, I'll use the word power. The power is not yours, but you are close to power. What is the meaning of that power, to you?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, I think the first thing to recognize, that the power is not even the President's power, it's a power that's bestowed on him, it's a temporary -- it's a trust, is what it is, it's a trust. And it's important to think of it that way. But to me, the power is [00:22:00] an opportunity to try and make this country better, to make the world a little bit better, to deal with things that will shape the future in a more positive way, to become a force for constructive dialogue, here and around the world. The President of the United States and the United States of America is still a beacon to so many around the world, and to understand that piece of this, and to exercise -- one of

the things I'm proud of is that we've made so much progress in the last couple of years, in restoring America's place and leadership in the world. And the President's been a force in many different ways, to do that. In nuclear proliferation, and a series of other things, and I'm proud of that. But I fundamentally believe that this has to be viewed as an opportunity, [00:23:00] to solve problems and to pave the way for the future, so that the world that our kids inherit is a little bit better than the one that we have today, and I think that's the way the president views it as well. One of the disconnects that we sometimes feel and see in our politics, in Washington, the dialogue is generally about who's up and who's down, who's ahead in the polls and who's behind, how many seats is one side going to win or the other. I mean, the President's approval rating is published every single day. I mean, he's not going to be running for reelection for two more years, and for a year, his approval rating is published every day. And there's an awful lot of talk about that. But at the end of the day, what does that all mean? [00:24:00] And so, we try and measure our success by the things that we can accomplish. I'll give you an example, on the issue of healthcare. And you know a little bit about me, so you know that I have a child who has a chronic illness, and has

since she was seven months old, epilepsy, and it's been devastating to her, and when she was born, I was a young reporter, and I was making a pretty modest salary. I had pretty inadequate insurance, and almost went broke because they didn't cover her 8,000 or 10,000 dollars a year in medications. Or, any additional help that she needed that was outside of their package. We tried to switch insurance policies, and she couldn't, we couldn't, because she had a preexisting medical condition. So, you know, the night that we [00:25:00] passed the healthcare bill, I found myself very emotional, and I went into my office and teared up, because I thought about those struggles, and I thought, you know what, in the future, people won't have to go through that anymore. You'll be able -- you know, no child's going to be excluded, no one's going to go broke, and I thought, this is why we're here. This is what power is for, is to help make it better for people and I did remember, during the course of that debate -- you know, I'm often depicted in these stories as the guy who comes in with polling, because that's part of my job. It may seem profane to some, but I do -- you know, that's part of my portfolio. [00:26:00] And I remember going in to see the President in the summer of 2009, and I said, "Mr. President, you just need to know that this is a very

difficult fight, and we're expending political capital to get this done." And he listened respectfully. The President's a great listener, and he listened very intently, and we were standing in the Oval Office, I remember it really clearly. And he said, "You know, I know you're right," he said. "But I just got back from Green Bay, and I met a young woman, 36 years old, she had stage four breast cancer, two small children, a husband. They had insurance, but it doesn't cover hardly anything that she needs. And now, she's worried about going bankrupt and leaving her family bereft and bankrupt." And he put his hand on my shoulder, and he said, "That's not the country we believe in. We have to keep on going," as he gently pushed me toward the door. (laughter) [00:27:00] But, you know, I am proud to go to work every day for a president like that. (applause)

ELIE WIESEL: I am upset with pollsters. I think it's wrong that today, countries are being ruled by pollsters. (applause) Just wrong. I think our leaders should not even look at them. They should do whatever they are doing for moral reasons, for principles, but not for pollsters. Do you know, if the Hebrews or the Jews in the desert -- if there were polls, Moses would never have been elected. (laughter) He was the wrong leader. He was a stutterer,

and what they did to him -- what America is doing to its presidents, [00:28:00] in plural, is nothing, compared to what Moses had to endure from our people. Our ancestors, and our forefathers. What they did to him. They accused him of anything in the world. I always feel sorry for Moses, you know. (laughter)

DAVID AXELROD: On the other hand, here we are still talking about him.

ELIE WIESEL: Yeah, we are talking -- not only that, and learning from him. I study Moses, I study. Well, you know, I am who I am. But tell me -- when I come to the White House, I am always terribly moved, because I always remember where I come from. And when I sit down with the President, again, I am terribly moved because I think of where I come from. Because I am a refugee at heart. The refugee in me remained a refugee. I came to America as a stateless person, unwanted everywhere. And, you know what I do -- when Marion, my wife, when we drive -- I used to drive the car, and we had to make a U-turn, [00:29:00] I stopped, changed seats with her, and she made the U-turn. (laughter) She's not afraid of the police. I'm afraid of the police. (laughs) I am a refugee. So there is always something. Do you feel the same? After all this -- the son of survivors, really.

DAVID AXELROD: Oh, listen, one of the most incredible experiences of my life was on July 7th of 2009, I was in Moscow with the President, and I stood in a line with the other officials at the opening ceremony of a bilateral meeting. I watched the Russian army band play The Star-Spangled Banner, as the President and the president of Russia stood. And it happened to be my father's -- it would've been my father's 99th birthday, and I thought, [00:30:00] what an incredible country this is, because my father was driven out of Eastern Europe. He came to America. And now, his son is working for the President of the United States, who's an African-American. And I was really moved by that. And I'm always conscious, I'm always conscious of that. And it makes me proud of our country, and that's something I never want to let go of. But I also remember our trip to Buchenwald, when you agreed to come with the President there, and our ride over there, and you guys had a -- I was privileged to just be a fly on the wall for your conversation, and he talked to you about your books. He talked to you about a lecture you gave at Occidental College when he was in college, and that he said helped persuade him that it was time to get serious about life. [00:31:00] And as you know, he transferred here to Columbia University after that. And I remember saying to

you (pause) that -- how extraordinary it was, that here you were, you came -- you know, the first time you came there, you came under those horrific circumstances, and now you're flying back there with the President of the United States, who -- and the first African-American President of the United States. And I said -- I forget what phrase I used. This is such a good story, and now I'm forgetting my half of the story. (laughter) But I said, something about history, a sense of history -- do you remember this? I said, history, this is quite a moment. And you said, "Well" -- [00:32:00] oh, I said, "There's a certain justice to this." And you said, "Well, history may not have a sense of justice, but it certainly has a sense of humor." (laughter) Okay, it was a good story, right? It was worth my -- (applause) It was worth my stumbling around for it.

ELIE WIESEL: Actually, to complete the stories, I was in Israel when the White House called and Marion answered. And they invited me to Buchenwald. And she called me, to Israel, I came to New York. And of course, I said yes. And she said to me, "Prepare a speech." I said, "I don't have to speak there. I am only going for the President, to accompany him, I think to explain to him what Buchenwald was." And she said, "Be better. Prepare a speech." And when I don't listen to her, it's never good. (laughter) I

didn't prepare. And you remember, I wasn't on the program. The printed program did not include my name. It had a name of Angela Merkel, [00:33:00] and the President. And the President, as he was literally going up to the lectern, he turned to me and he said, "Elie. The last word should be yours." I hadn't prepared anything. (laughter)

DAVID AXELROD: Yes, I remember, and you stumbled through a speech that brought everyone to tears. (laughter) I remember it very well. You made that moment. But, I also remember something else that I'll always -- that will always stick with me, an important lesson. One more reason why I'm so honored to sit with you. One of my colleagues said, "Do you -- is it hard for you to come back to Germany, and how can you stand with a German leader?" And you said, "The children of murderers are not murderers." And I thought it was an extraordinary [00:34:00] statement of grace that you looked at it that way. It was an important lesson. So, I learned from you.

ELIE WIESEL: Tell me, David. I'm sure you know the name Gilad Shalit.

DAVID AXELROD: You know what?

ELIE WIESEL: Gilad Shalit.

DAVID AXELROD: Yes, yes, yes.

ELIE WIESEL: Does the President do anything about it? Because
-- (applause)

DAVID AXELROD: This is obviously part of a mix of extraordinary concerns that we have. This is such a critical juncture, I think, in the history of Israel and the history of that conflict, and, you know, [00:35:00] what we're hoping for, what we're working for -- Secretary Clinton is working day and night -- is to move forward in such a way that we can create peace and security for Israel and hopefully, resolve that issue, and many others. Now obviously, this is an issue of Hamas, and, you know -- so, it's extraordinarily difficult. But I have this deep feeling that -- you know, Secretary Clinton said the other day, we have to seize this moment because it may not come again. I think we all feel that way, and I'm gratified that people are working hard to try and get through this, and keep these talks [00:36:00] moving forward. And hopefully, as part of this, we can resolve some of these other issues. But that's a particularly thorny one, because of Hamas, and --

ELIE WIESEL: Four years. This young man, for four years. What it does to his parents, what it does to the country. Four years. And the Red Cross is not even allowed to visit him. But we know he's alive. So I would expect the President was a compassionate man, as I know him. Just, in

one of his speeches, to appeal -- "I appeal to those who keep him prisoner. Free him, it's enough. It's just enough." (applause) As for the situation in Israel, where are we? (laughter)

DAVID AXELROD: We are (pause) -- we are, [00:37:00] I think, at an -- obviously, as I said, at a critical juncture, and I'm not -- I can't be too forth--

ELIE WIESEL: No details.

DAVID AXELROD: Yeah, right. But I think that the parties are still trying to make an effort here, to get past the current impasse and keep these talks going. I think there's been some very productive dialogue, and, you know, our goal and our hope is that we can keep that dialogue going, and, you know, we'll hopefully have an answer on that relatively soon. But, you know, again, I feel -- all of us feel a sense of urgency, because there are a confluence of factors here that suggest that this is the time, and that we have to seize this opportunity, [00:38:00] and as someone -- look, I've been to Israel six times, and I have a deep, deep, strong emotional feelings about it, and I want to see -- I want to see -- I do not want to see Israel consigned to constant conflict, constant battles, constant bloodshed. I want to see that security, and we're pressing all the parties, including the Arab

states, to see their way to that better place. And, as I said, I think we've made some progress, and I hope that in the next few days, we'll make some more.

ELIE WIESEL: Your turn to ask me a question. (laughs) An easier one.

DAVID AXELROD: Well, look, now that we're on the subject, tell me how you analyze the situation from where you sit.

[00:39:00] I know you spend a lot of time in Israel, and you spend a lot of time talking to leaders in Israel. Tell me what your sense of the moment is.

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, my feeling is that in Israel, too, people say it's enough. Just enough. Since 1948, it's the longest war, or the state of war, that exists, actually. This, for many, many, many, many, many decades. Since '48, Israel is in a state of war. And I'm convinced that most of the Israelis, most of them, really want to end it, and live in peace. And actually, they are waiting for the opportunity. And you remember, my feeling was that to start negotiating, first of all, easier questions, and go to the harder questions, but start with only one objective: [00:40:00] to live in peace with each other. And I'm optimistic, by the way. And I am optimistic mainly because of what I read. I won't speak to you on the telephone of these matters. What I read is the President committed. Is committed to obtain

peace within a year, as he said, and I pray that that will happen. Which leads me to a question: when will the President go to Israel?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, there's no doubt that that is something that we're going to do, and (pause) -- sorry. And the timing is important, in terms of how we can maximize that visit in a way that's most constructive. He was there, as you know, in the summer of 2008, [00:41:00] and had a very both constructive and meaningful visit, and he'll be going back, and I'm eager, because I'm eager to go with him, so -- but, you know, I think if we gather again here in a year, I don't think you'll be asking me that same question.

ELIE WIESEL: David, difficult question. Iran.

DAVID AXELROD: Mm-hmm.

ELIE WIESEL: There is a man called Ahmadinejad, he's the president of Iran, and he has two obsessions. One, he is the number one Holocaust denier in the world. Two, his goal -- he says it publicly -- he wants to exterminate the state of Israel. What do we do?

DAVID AXELROD: Well, the -- I don't think there's an issue [00:42:00] in the last two years, an international issue, that the President has spent more time on than this one. And, you know, I watched from the beginning, watched him create an international consensus on Iran. You know, when

we took office, the world was divided on the issue of Iran, and Iran was united. Today, Iran is divided and the world is more united than it's ever been. And a lot of it has to do with the persistent, painstaking work the President did in bringing together an international coalition, and in imposing sanctions that are increasingly biting. The Washington Post had a piece today on how disruptive these sanctions have been, [00:43:00] and how it's creating unrest in Iran, and problems for the administration of Ahmadinejad. But obviously, we have to keep going, and we have said -- and, as you know, because we've talked about it, you know we've worked closely with Israel on this issue. There's been constant consultation on this, in ways that are public, in ways that can't be, to try and turn them around, and, you know, we've always left open the door for them to walk through, understanding that we have to keep all options open, but we are encouraged by the fact that there has been such a response on the part of the world -- on the part of Russia and China, [00:44:00] Europe. Each day, the net is tightening, and they're going to have to make a choice. And, you know, we just have to be persistent. But the threat is clear. You articulated it, and we're very cognizant of it.

ELIE WIESEL: The President said, "A nuclear Iran is unacceptable." What does that mean?

DAVID AXELROD: I think it's pretty plain, and that's why we've gone to the extraordinary efforts to go down this road, but -- and it's obviously unacceptable for the reason that you state, it's unacceptable because it would start [00:45:00] another era of proliferation in that region. It would be enormously destabilizing, not just because of the threat to Israel, but because of the things that it would propagate. And so, what it means is that we have to do everything that we can to prevent that from happening. And we're doing that. But it has to be done -- I think that what the President has wisely done is bring the world along with him on this, and I think that's going to end up making an enormous difference.

ELIE WIESEL: You know, I have another idea. (laughs) For him. Which I addressed the session of Parliament in Italy, and in Hungary, and all kinds of places. My idea is that Ahmadinejad should be arrested. And brought to Hague (applause), [00:46:00] indicted for incitement of crimes against humanity. This is the only, only crime. The intent is criminal. It happened with Pinochet, and they arrested him. Let it be done with Ahmadinejad. But I know you cannot answer me that.

DAVID AXELROD: Well, I will say this: we imposed sanctions recently on eight members of the Iranian administration related to human rights. You're right, I can't address your particular suggestion, but we have to be vigilant, and we can't turn a blind eye to the moral dimensions of this.

ELIE WIESEL: I think we are ready for the Skype?

DAVID AXELROD: Skype questions.

ELIE WIESEL: Here is a young man. Okay. Go ahead.

[00:47:00]

DAN MINK: Hello?

ELIE WIESEL: Yes.

DAVID AXELROD: Yes, hello.

ELIE WIESEL: We hear you.

DAN MINK: Hello. Good evening, Professor and Mr. Axelrod.

ELIE WIESEL: Good evening.

DAVID AXELROD: Good evening.

DAN MINK: My name is Dan Mink, and I received an honorable mention for the 2009 Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics Essay Contest. I want to ask about the role that Nobel laureates play in our society, specifically the ethics of the Nobel Peace Prize laureates weighing in on controversial international issues. And if these individuals have been recognized and celebrated as professional peacemakers, great thinkers and activists for the cause of a better

world, should there be a protocol or ethics, similar to other professions, that requires them to be up front about their interests, and political views, on either side of a conflict? Thanks.

DAVID AXELROD: I'm going to -- no, I'm going to yield to you, because that's way above my [00:48:00] intellectual capacity or pay grade.

ELIE WIESEL: (laughs) It's a very elegant way of not saying -- look, I do believe that whatever we do must have a moral dimension. That applies to literature, that applies to philosophy, that applies to politics, too. A moral dimension, which means that whatever -- I would like, actually, in every society, almost in every community, and in every enterprise. There should be always one person, who at one point in the debate, should stop and say, "My good friends, and what about morality and all that?" If it's an economic entity, money -- wait a second. What about morality and all that? Where is the moral dimension there, the moral voice, the moral demand, the moral need, the moral possibility, and the moral exigence? [00:49:00] So, I am for that. We should have almost a kind of -- another obsession. We shall like. A healthy obsession. To be a carrier, a vehicle, of moral principles, and to say, "Look. A society is judged by its capacity for

transcending its immediate needs and think of the needs of the others."

DAVID AXELROD: I certainly agree with that. I guess my confusion was just this notion of designating someone to be that -- it seems, maybe just because I work in Washington, it seems (laughter) -- it seems like an odd thing to do, and the truth is that I think anyone -- that all of us should carry that sense, and I think there's something that strikes me as slightly odd that we would say, "We're going to count on you, [00:50:00] over there, in seat number six, to be our conscience." I would hope that there's a conscience in each of us, and that there's a common basis on which we can move forward, you know?

ELIE WIESEL: Not only that, you cannot delegate your conscience. (laughs)

DAVID AXELROD: Yeah.

ELIE WIESEL: Your conscience is your conscience, and mine is mine, and therefore, of course, conscience is something which you must listen to. But to my own.

DAVID AXELROD: Yeah. Well, I -- just getting back to your, I think, understandable and welcome diatribe about pollsters -- many of whom are my friends -- but I think, leaving the practitioners out of it, I think one of the things that's happened -- and I said this before when I talked about

who's up and who's down, and the sort of reigning philosophy of our politics -- [00:51:00] is that the highest goal under that sort of framework is to perpetuate yourself in power. Winning elections is the highest goal. And I'm eager to do that in order to further a set of ideals, and a set of solutions to problems, but I think if the highest goal is simply to win, then you're willing to sacrifice too much. And I came from the political consulting profession, so I've helped profane the process to some degree myself, because we all have this technology, we all can say to someone in public life, you know, here's what you need to say or do to win. And for many, [00:52:00] that is a, that is an irresistible proposition. Again, one of the reasons that I appreciate working for the President is that he's not indifferent to these things, but, you know, Steve Rattner wrote a book about the auto industry, and the President's decision to intervene on behalf of the auto industry, and he reported there that I came in with some polls and told the President that it was highly unpopular to intervene, to help save these auto companies. And in fact, I did do that, that's my job, but what was interesting and needed elaboration was that the President said, much as he did on the healthcare issue, "You know, I get that, but we're in the middle of the worst

recession since the Great Depression and there are hundreds of thousands of jobs associated with these companies, not just the companies themselves, but spin-offs, [00:53:00] and if we can use our leverage to get them to rationalize themselves and become competitive, and these folks can continue to work, and they'll hire more people in the future, it's -- then we have to do that." So in this whole issue of morality, and ethics, and part of it is -- at least from the standpoint of public life, you have to have a clear sense of why you're doing it, and it's not enough simply to win. It's just not enough. And you have to know what you're fighting for, and so this is a constant struggle that we have in public life today.

ELIE WIESEL: Power is like everything else: it's like money and like love, it depends what you do with it. (laughter)

DAVID AXELROD: Yeah. I agree.

ELIE WIESEL: Now, next question. Young lady, we listen to you.

MAE GIBSON WALL: Good evening. My name is Mae Gibson Wall, [00:54:00] and I am a winner of the Elie Wiesel Foundation Prize in Ethics. My question is this: more than 35 million Americans live in poverty, including over 12 million children. I believe the issue of what a nation is willing to pay its workers is a matter of ethics. Do you view the

discrepancy between the federal minimum wage and a true living wage as a moral imperative? Also, what is the United States' responsibility as an international leader in this global human rights issue? (applause)

DAVID AXELROD: I -- look, one of the things that concerns me -- you asked, what are the things that trouble me? I touched on it earlier, is this widening chasm in our society between the haves and have-nots, between people who are doing very well and the poor. [00:55:00] We've seen poverty grow during this recession, and we see a kind of intractable poverty. So, yes, I think it's important that people are paid a living wage, but I also think there's more to it. It's important that people are given the tools they need to earn a living wage, and to make the most of their lives. One of the things that we're working hard on is this whole issue of education reform. I mean, I think that one of the moral challenges of our country is, are we going to educate all of our children, and give them the capacity they need to realize their full potential? That's as important to our economic future as any issue, but it's also as important to our social fabric as any. We live in a time, in the 21st century, [00:56:00] when education is the biggest predictor of one's quality of life, ability to earn a decent living, and so on. And yet, we are sliding

relative to other countries in terms of the level -- the proficiency of our students in all areas, but in math and science is the one that gets a great deal of attention, for obvious reasons. One of the great debates we're having right now, leading up to this November 2nd election, is that the President has invested more money in education, but he's also used that money to challenge states to lift their standards, to the so-called Race to the Top. He took 60 billion dollars that would have gone in the next ten years to financial institutions, to essentially act as middlemen in terms of managing federal grants, Pell Grants, for students who need [00:57:00] financial aid to get a higher education, and he's taken that money, and he's giving it to the students instead. And also, to upgrade our community college system. Our opponents on the other side have proposed a plan that would cut education by 20 percent, that would slash student aid for eight million people. The effect of those cuts would mean that the school reforms would be gutted, and we'll be consigning millions and millions of kids to ignorance and poverty. And America, to a lack of competitiveness. So, I appreciate the question and the answer is, of course I think people should be paid a living wage. I know it has a particular implication. But in general, I think that's

certainly true. But I also think we have to think more deeply about [00:58:00] what it takes for people to make the most of their lives in this century, in this world. And we have to be seriously committed to giving everybody that opportunity. So, that's my answer.

ELIE WIESEL: When I hear the word "poverty," I tremble.

Literally, because poverty means hunger. And maybe because of my past, I have been fighting, fighting hunger. That was part of my life. The prophet Ezekiel mentions *herpat ra'av*, the shame of hunger, and for a long time I didn't understand. Why does he speak about the shame of hunger? Why should a hungry person feel shame? And then I came to a different interpretation. It's not the hungry person who should feel shame when he is hungry. I should feel shame when he is hungry. [00:59:00] (applause) My turn, David. (laughs) A question which will sadden you. Explain to me, because today, while we were having our conversations with the Nobel laureates, a few of them asked, "How come the President, who was so popular, was elected by such a wave of enthusiasm and joy and hope, and all of a sudden, he is losing ground in the polls?" Forgive me, in the polls. (laughs)

DAVID AXELROD: I thought you were the one who despised the poll.

ELIE WIESEL: Yes, but I guess --

DAVID AXELROD: Now you're citing them.

ELIE WIESEL: I am citing them in order to show that I don't like them. But the main thing -- I am repeating the question, is really, what happened? How do you explain that? It hurts, it hurts, but why do you explain it?

DAVID AXELROD: It does. I'd say a few things about it. He did get elected on [01:00:00] a wave of enthusiasm. He also got 53 percent of the vote. Forty-six percent of people weren't as enthusiastic, and voted against him. But I said to him, we sat in a room -- first of all, we knew during the campaign -- I mean, it was an extraordinary experience, just the experience of a lifetime, to travel this country with him during this campaign, and there was a real hunger for something different and for change. But we knew that expectations were extraordinarily high, and that the challenge was going to be to manage that against the enormous array of problems we were going to face. And that was before we knew the depth of them. [01:01:00] On December 16th, 2008, we had a meeting in Chicago, the President and his economic advisers. Christina Romer, who was about to become the head of the Council of Economic Advisers, and was an expert on the Great Depression, came in with her charts, and said in a way -- because this is her way -- that was far more upbeat than the circumstances,

that we were about to enter, or we were in the greatest downturn since the Great Depression. Larry Summers said, we're going to lose a trillion dollars or more of output in our economy, and this is going to result in this much unemployment and dislocation. Tim Geithner, the incoming Treasury Secretary, said the financial system is locked up, and no loans are being given, and it could collapse, and if it collapses, we will have a second Great Depression.

[01:02:00] And then Peter Orszag, our budget director, gave his report on what this all meant for our budget situation, for the debt which was going to increase dramatically because of all of this. So, having quickly ascertained that we could not refuse the honor of serving, you know, we began to plan how to save the country from that prospect of a second Great Depression, but when we left the room, I said to the President, "Here's what I know. Two years from now, these lavish, gaudy polling numbers you have are not going to be what they are today, and all of us who were considered geniuses are going to be denigrated by the Washington establishment because of that. And it's just predictable, because we are about to go through an extraordinarily difficult time. We're not going to be able to do everything that we had hoped, on the schedule that we had hoped, [01:03:00] and it took almost a decade to dig

this hole, it's going to take longer than any of us would like to get out of it." So, you know, I think you have two things collided, and then there's a third. The first was these extraordinary expectations. The second was these problems that exceeded anyone's understanding at the time of the election. And then the third is the process that you have to go through in Washington to deal with problems. You know, the first thing we had to do was pass a recovery act. It was, you know, politically, it was difficult. We had hoped that the Republican Party would, you know, in a time of national emergency, that we could pull together. The President went over to see the Republican caucus in the Congress [01:04:00] to talk about the need for this recovery act, and they issued a press release before he arrived saying they were going to vote unanimously against it. And, you know, and then we went through this very difficult legislative process, not just to pass that, but everything, that exposed, in many ways, the things that most irritate and concern people about Washington: hyper-partisanship, the influence of special interests, all the political machinations. And I think that was unsettling to people. So, you know, now, against that, we did pass a recovery act, and history will look back on it and say, at this time of maximum peril, we did something that was

absolutely necessary and had the effect of stopping a freefall in our economy, along with the financial steps we took, [01:05:00] also unpopular. He did intervene on the auto industry, and now we see the auto industry reborn. And then we did a series of other things, not just healthcare, but financial reform. We added, even before health reform, four million children of working families who didn't have healthcare, to healthcare. We have expanded, as part of the recovery act, food programs, because of exactly what you said. We're now trying to pass a child nutrition bill through the Congress. I mean, there's a series of things. We restored science to its rightful place, and restored stem cell research, and we're still fighting that fight. We passed the Lilly Ledbetter Law, so that people -- so that women could be treated equally in the workplace, when it comes to pay. We finally, after all the years we were fighting, got tobacco under the authority of the FDA so that we could stop [01:06:00] the marketing of cigarettes to children. We did just a whole range of things that I think, in the future, are going to save lives, enrich lives -- I mentioned education reform -- and so, I understand the despair. I understand the disappointment. I also think that when the fog lifts of this economic catastrophe, people are going to

look around, and they're going to see that we're a better and stronger country for the things we've done over the last couple of years. And our commitment is to fight through all of this, to pay less attention to the polls and pay all of our attention to solving problems and strengthening our country and helping people through a difficult time, and creating jobs and opportunity, building a foundation for the future. And I'm confident that we will get there. [01:07:00] That's what happened, and that's what I think will happen. (applause)

ELIE WIESEL: Last question.

DAVID AXELROD: No, I have a question for you, right?

ELIE WIESEL: Oh, you have a question for me.

DAVID AXELROD: Okay. I'm looking at --

ELIE WIESEL: Somebody else's question.

DAVID AXELROD: There are a few that are mischievous in here, I'm not going to ask you. I'll ask you a very general question, which you can take any -- that someone gave me, which you can take any way you want, which is, what have you learned recently that has changed your perspective?
(laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: (laughs) Perspective of what? (laughs)

DAVID AXELROD: I don't know, someone wrote this question.

ELIE WIESEL: Something, I don't know.

DAVID AXELROD: Like I said, I think this is an invitation for you to say anything you like. (laughter)

ELIE WIESEL: (laughs) Well, you know, I really don't think that I change my perspective on things in this instant. [01:08:00] It depends. If I learn a new element of an equation, I change my mind. I am not embarrassed by that. I am not embarrassed to say I was wrong. I didn't understand it, and therefore, I changed my position. I am not a fanatic. Only fanatics don't change positions. (laughter) I do. It's possible I changed my perspective. In politics? No, I don't think so. I didn't learn anything, let's say, in the last few years, that would change my situation. I am -- I don't belong to any party, I am neither Republican nor Democrat, nor is Marion. That's why we get along so well. (laughs) But, those that I like, I like. And I am very faithful in those people that I like. (applause)

DAVID AXELROD: Well, let me finish where I began [01:09:00] and just thank you for --

ELIE WIESEL: Wait, I haven't finished. I have the last question. (laughter)

DAVID AXELROD: Wait, oh you get to ask me the last question?

ELIE WIESEL: I am asking you the last question.

DAVID AXELROD: I thought I could sneak off here.

ELIE WIESEL: You cannot. No, this is a good one. (laughs)

Where is hope today?

DAVID AXELROD: Where is hope? (pause) I think that there are many reasons to hope, but I think we have to search harder for it today, as you always do in hard times. I don't mean to become, sort of, programmatic and bureaucratic about these things. I told you about my experience about healthcare, and the impact that I had -- that that had on me. And some of the other things, that when I see schools [01:10:00] that are actually redeeming young lives that would have been lost, that gives me hope. When I see there's a town in Illinois, Herrin, Illinois, where I read about, where -- that was devastated by a plant closing, and they all -- and the town came together and really pitched in and looked after each other, helped each other, set up their own support systems, brought other businesses in, relocated people, and didn't yield to the despair, but worked through it together, as a community, that gives me hope. There's, you know, I think there are reasons to hope all around us, but we have to look for it. We have to look for it. Look, you give me reason for hope. I asked you a question tonight about this issue here in New York. You gave me a great idea, [01:11:00] or these folks a great idea, and that gives me hope. I don't think -- and I'm, in

truth, as I think about it, I feel woefully ill-equipped to answer that question in your presence because you've gone through experiences in your life in which hopelessness was almost unavoidable, and yet, you're a hopeful person. So, you know, I think that even in hard times, we have to maintain hope, and look for hope around us, and believe that we can change our circumstances, that we're not simply flotsam on the waters of history. And so, hope is us.

[01:12:00] Hope is our ability to grab the oars and row. And I believe in that. (applause)

ELIE WIESEL: David, I dream because despair is not an option. Despair can never be productive. And therefore, I -- on the other hand, I know -- only another person could drive me to despair. A disappointment, pain inflicted on me -- only another person. But only another person can pull me away from despair. Which means hope, too, is linked to the other. If I were alone, I think I would probably have given up hope. I am not alone. [01:13:00] And I have a wife, I have a son, I have two grandchildren, and therefore, for the sake of children, and for the sake of all those who live today and who bring more children, therefore, hope is unavoidable as an option. We cannot live without it, and I have no right to deprive anyone of hope. And the problem occasionally could have happened:

how can I see to it that my hope should not be at the
expense of the despair of another? My hope does not want
to be, cannot be, in such a situation. But I do hope we'll
meet again (laughter), here (laughs), and we will continue.
(applause)

DAVID AXELROD: Thank you.

ELIE WIESEL: Thank you. (applause) [01:14:00]

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