

Marie Yovanovitch Transcript

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Mila Atmos: [00:00:34] And another thing before we get into this week's show. This month, Future Hindsight is featured in the AAPI Voices category on Stitcher. So I wanted to say a quick thank you to Stitcher and urge you all to check out some of the other amazing podcasts in this section this month, like Chasing Life with Dr. Sanjay Gupta and Add to Cart with Kulap Vilaysack and SuChin Pak.

Mila Atmos: [00:01:04] Welcome to Future Hindsight, a podcast that takes big ideas about civic life and democracy and turns them into action items for you and me. I'm Mila Atmos. Just this past week I had the honor of interviewing former US ambassador to Ukraine and newest best selling author Marie Yovanovitch in a live event hosted by our friends at Big Tent USA. A bit of background: Big Tent is an organization founded by a group of women in 2019 as a moderate political advocacy organization focused on protecting the rights of all Americans, encouraging civic engagement, and promoting smart and effective governance. It's rare for diplomats to become household names. But the glare of the spotlight fell upon today's guest when, while she was U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch became the target of a smear campaign driven by conspiracy theories and political vengeance. The campaign against her was amplified by then President Trump and his allies. And she would be abruptly recalled to Washington in May of 2019. Two months later, she was chillingly singled out by Trump in his infamous, so-called perfect phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Ambassador Yovanovitch was a key witness in the first impeachment trial of Donald Trump. Her recent memoir, *Lessons from the Edge*, details her illustrious career, her courage and integrity, and her patriotic dedication and service to the United States. I was doubly excited to speak with her because beyond discussing her work and

her book, I wanted to express a debt of gratitude I owed her mother. So this is our conversation recorded live for Big Tent, and it's been edited for length and clarity.

Mila Atmos: [00:03:02] I was lucky enough to know your mother. She was my German teacher in a class of only two students, so I spent a lot of quality time with her. She was always so kind to me. And, you know, I was a slightly lost foreign student at boarding school, so I wanted to start with that. She was an incredible woman and always so kind and I remember her with much fondness. But I also wanted to start with your parents because of their story and how it is the start of your own story. They were refugees. Your mother had been a stateless person and also your father. And how did their experiences influence your path to becoming a diplomat?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:03:39] Well, thank you for asking about my parents, because in writing this book, I really wanted to honor them. They had incredible lives and were just exemplary people in so many ways. But, you know, they started out, as you said, as stateless refugees in Europe during and after World War II and made their way to Canada and then ultimately the United States and sort of ended up in this lovely little town of Kent, Connecticut, where they brought up my brother and myself. And they were just always so grateful that they had refuge in the United States where they could worship as they wanted to. They could say what they wanted to. They had freedom. There was rule of law. There weren't going to be arbitrary arrests for unknown things. And we had opportunities if you worked hard and you did well in school -- that's what we were told. You could have the American dream. And they believed in that because they knew what it was like to live under autocracy, and they knew what the value of living in a democracy was. And that's the way they brought us up.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:04:42] And so they told us we were fortunate and so we needed to give back. I mean, I believe that my parents as teachers at Kent School, they gave back not only in the classroom, but also I think they taught many of their students lessons in life. And, you know, in terms of taking people into our home and just talking them through some of the challenges of being a teenager, frankly, and they were always giving back. And so my brother and I were brought up in that tradition. And when I was thinking about what I wanted to do, I thought about the Foreign Service. I took some detours along the way, as one does. And then when I was living in New York, I finally decided that what I was doing was just not that interesting to me, you know? And

I wanted to marry up my interest in history and politics and traveling and meeting people from other cultures with my desire to give back and to serve the American people. And that's totally from my parents.

Mila Atmos: [00:05:37] For sure. Your parents always gave back. I was often invited to a home cooked meal as opposed to a cafeteria meal, so I always appreciated that. Well, there is something about how those experiences really engender, right, an appreciation for and dedication to democracy and to diplomacy. So I have a question about Ukraine and your work there, which was a continuation of a career long focus on anti-corruption. Why has that always been so central to your work, and what were the challenges Ukraine in particular was facing?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:06:12] Yeah, so, you know, when I wrote this book, I actually realized, you know, the patterns in your life and that in almost every post that I was in, there were issues of corruption that we had to deal with in one way or another. But in Somalia, in Ukraine, the first time I was there from 2001 to 2004, at least as far as I knew, as a, you know, relatively junior employee in Somalia and as a more senior person, the number two at the embassy when I was in Ukraine for the first time. Corruption was not a part of what we really discussed. I mean, we understood that it was there, but it's not something that we discussed. It wasn't part of our assistance programs in terms of trying to help the host country deal with it. I think there was a sense at that time that, you know, this was something we just needed to navigate around. But then moving forward, when I came back to Ukraine in 2016, after the revolution of dignity, after the Ukrainian people themselves had said, you know, this is something super important, we need to stop this and we need help in getting this done. This became not only part of the Ukrainian government's policy after that revolution, it became a part of our policy as well. And so I'd like to say that it was all me, but in fact it wasn't because, you know, I am an employee for the U.S. government, even as an ambassador. So you have some input into the policy process, but then you implement the US government policy. And so that's what I was doing and frankly we were all in on that because we could see the damage that corruption was causing to Ukraine. And if corruption weakens one of our partner countries, that weakens the relationship because that country is not as reliable a partner, it's not a good business partner for our businesses. And so we were all in in terms of trying to help Ukraine, you know, do something about that problem.

Mila Atmos: [00:08:04] So why is corruption so corrosive in your experience?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:08:08] Well, I think what happens is that in authoritarian regimes, you see leaders feeling that they are entitled and that they should be able to benefit from, you know, basically the country's coffers and the resources and the taxes that are accrued and all the funding streams that really they belong to the people of that country, whether it's the people of Ukraine or the people of Somalia. But, you know, greedy authoritarian leaders always feel that they are entitled and they most often confuse the state with themselves. And so if it's the states, then, you know, it must be theirs and it must all be okay. And they need lots of money, because once you start stealing and start that system, you also need to spread it around to certain of your colleagues, henchmen, whatever you want to call them, to keep them loyal and engaged and supportive of you. And and it never ends, right? Because you're always insecure, because what you're doing is wrong and you're building up other enemies on the other side, your political opponents, the people of the country who, you know, instead of the money of the country going to provide services, you know, a good, good education for kids or building roads or cleaning up the water supply. I mean, whatever governments are supposed to do. I mean, the purpose of government is not having a government. The purpose of government is to provide services to the people. And that wasn't happening in Somalia. It wasn't happening in many of the countries of the former Soviet Union, including Russia and, of course, Ukraine. And so it's extremely corrosive because that kind of theft breeds all sorts of resentment. And then you start getting petty corruption, because when there are no services in a country, I mean, people are going to find a way, whether they live in Mogadishu or someplace else.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:09:55] I'll just give you an example. When I was in Russia in the 1980s, I mean, this was a relatively prosperous time for the Soviet Union. But if you lived in a new housing complex in the outskirts of Moscow, so you were already in Moscow, so you were already lucky. There was a three year waiting list to get a phone installed in your new apartment, and that was in the day before cell phones. So this was a huge problem. But, you know, people figured it out. You know, they find, you know, the telephone guy who was, you know, working in their district and they would give him something a little extra on the side and he would bump them up to the top of the list. And then somebody else, you know, pays that person. And, you know, you want the

good medicine for your child who is sick from western Germany, which is only available for the elites. But you pay the doctor to give you that on the side. And so there's this whole parallel system of corruption when the government and in the Soviet Union, doctors, pretty much everybody, was an employee of the state. There was this whole parallel system for individuals to get what they needed to keep themselves and their families going when actually the government could just provide those services. But that's not what was happening in the Soviet Union, and it was not what was happening in the early years in any of these countries.

Mila Atmos: [00:11:17] So your work in helping in partnership with these other governments to combat corruption -- when did you start, especially in Ukraine, when did you start to have the sense that your work was attracting maybe the wrong kind of attention?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:11:33] Well, I mean, when you're working on anticorruption issues, it's always a sensitive issue because powerful people are making money on corruption and they don't like it when they're either not necessarily even being called out, but when those money streams stop. And so they're going to put roadblocks in the way. I mean, they may be government ministers, they may be powerful oligarchs. They have to say the right things. They talk the talk, but they don't necessarily walk the walk. And in fact, often they are blocking things. And this is honestly to be expected. And so we've been working on this for a number of years and we continue to do it. I knew that not everybody was happy with the efforts of the US embassy and me, you know, in charge of the embassy. I didn't know how, how much they didn't like it and really until the end of 2019. I mean, there had been all these rumors that people were asking about me and that Lutsenko, the prosecutor general, who was sort of the rough equivalent of our attorney general, that he was, you know, not happy with me, out to get me, etc., etc.. But until the end of 2018, the beginning of 2019, I didn't really understand how serious it was and that those in Ukraine who were unhappy with me had met up with hooked up with actors in the United States, including former President Trump's personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, and that he had his own whole own set of issues that he wanted to pursue, specifically finding dirt on former Vice President Biden, who was thought to be the front runner against President Trump in the next presidential elections.

Mila Atmos: [00:13:11] So I'm wondering if you can describe for us something that may be indescribable. What's it like as a career diplomat to find yourself at the center of a huge domestic political storm? You know, Giuliani basically running an errand for former President Trump. What was that like?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:13:30] Yeah, political errand, in the words of Fiona Hill. Well, it was, you know, I guess uncomfortable is the most diplomatic way one can put it. You know, career diplomats, public servants... we serve Republican administrations and Democratic administrations. You know, we are a democracy in the United States. And the people elect the president and the president, he or she, sets their own foreign policy. There can be a vigorous debate on foreign policy about what that might be and what that might look like. But once a direction is set, you know, US government employees are expected to follow that policy. And if you can't follow that policy, then you need to decide how you would register dissent, including perhaps even resigning. I mean, the fact of the matter is there's no employee in the U.S. government that agrees with everything that a particular administration does. And so you have to decide your threshold. I mean, these are all judgment calls that different people make in different ways. But I felt, you know, for myself that actually the Trump foreign policy, I mean, the official policy, not the political errand parallel foreign policy was actually pretty good. It was a continuation of the Obama foreign policy. You know, there was a strong emphasis on anti-corruption. It was all the same things. And in fact, Trump, after much persuasion, the end of his first year in office, he agreed to send Ukrainians javelins, which were, so the anti-tank missiles that we've heard so much about recently, which the Obama administration had not wanted to do. So it was actually a toughening up of our policy, which I welcome. So I was alert to anything going on that I would be uncomfortable with. But, you know, for for at least the early years, like I said, it was a continuation of the policy that had been and I thought it was pretty strong.

Mila Atmos: [00:15:15] Yeah. So you're saying that the policy in and of itself is not the problem, but the side policy or the parallel policy. It actually has like an almost movie thriller script quality when you read it. And it must have been so strange to be fighting corruption in foreign lands as a Foreign Service officer of the United States, only to find that your own president is using the power of the state for his personal interests. So this is when I want to ask you one of the excellent questions submitted by the audience, and that is, "what can we do to keep a future president from dismantling our US diplomatic

efforts in order to personally benefit himself or herself, family and inner circle of cronies?"

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:15:57] Yeah, that's a really good question. And I think it goes beyond dismantling foreign policy, goes to domestic policy as well, that, you know what I had seen overseas where people were using the power of their office to benefit themselves in one way or another, that in in the Trump administration, we were doing the same thing here. That was really devastating for me to see. And it was, you know, a real blow to our national security when it became so public that bad actors around the world could see that you could make a deal here. You know, if you don't like that pesky ambassador that's pursuing the policy of the United States, you can probably make a deal here that is not in our national interests. And so it was, it was really devastating. So what do we do about it? I think in the first instance, we need to elect the right elected representatives. I mean, what we found under the Trump administration is that issues that we thought were settled law, that there were laws and regulations about this. Actually, no, they were just standards that we had. There were expectations that we had that over 200 years previous presidents had met. And and President Trump did not. And so surprisingly, some of the things that he did were actually legal, even though they did not meet the expectations of many of the American people. And so I think there are some efforts to codify in law some of these things. So the one example I can think of is how does it work when once the college electors votes are brought to to the Congress, the House of Representatives, to count the vote, to make sure there's no question about that process, as was raised back in 20, I guess that was 2021 after the 2020 elections that Donald Trump still does not accept he lost.

Mila Atmos: [00:17:58] Yeah. So following on that thought, I feel like, you know, we're talking about the election having been quote unquote stolen and that people even are going to try to overturn the results. So the Trump years were really very revealing in terms of showing that institutions are, in the end, made up of fallible people and wobbly norms. You've talked about how betrayed you felt, by the way you were hung out to dry, basically, by Pompeo's State Department. And this was an institution that you had dedicated your life and career to. How has it changed the way you think about America's institutions and that institution in particular -- the State Department?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:18:41] Yeah, so I still think I mean, I spent a career telling people overseas and telling myself that we have strong institutions and that's why we have a strong democracy. But as you said, it turns out our institutions need us as employees, as citizens, as much as we need those strong institutions. And so it's, I think, part of it in the intake process to make sure that we are hiring people who, you know, are good at their jobs, our experts in their fields, but also are people of integrity that are going to do the right thing when the going gets tough. And that those those norms, those expectations of how we behave are part of the air that we breathe at the State Department or at other institutions. Because the thing is, I mean, you never certainly at the State Department in foreign policy, you never know what the next challenge is going to be. It's not like there's like, you know, A, B, C, D, these are the four problems that you're going to have. And you can pick from 1, 2, 3, 4 for how to solve it.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:19:44] There is no roadmap. And so we need to make sure that we are hiring people with a strong ethical basis and with really good judgment to kind of sort through everything because because it isn't clear. Often, certainly in foreign policy, there are shades of gray and that you have incomplete knowledge. I mean, I think now of Putin right now, everybody's wondering what's in his head, what's he going to do? We don't really know. And yet we need to to meet this challenge and do the best that we can with imperfect knowledge when the stakes are super, super high. So that's not the challenge that most employees are going to face. But, you know, they need to get it right on the little things because that also lays the basis for the decisions they make as the problem set becomes harder and more challenging and there is greater pressure. So I think, you know, it's it's hard to actually provide a specific answer to your question, but I would say that we just need to look for people of integrity and bring them up and reward that.

Mila Atmos: [00:20:49] Yeah. So you just mentioned Putin. Russia invaded Ukraine, right, on February 24th, which shocked the world for the most part. Everybody talked about it like it was going to happen, but then everybody thought, no, it was really not going to happen. So were you shocked?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:21:05] Well, I was shocked in the beginning because when I was in Ukraine, I mean, there was a hot war in the Donbas that had never stopped. 2 to 3 Ukrainian individuals were killed every week, civilians, soldiers. So I thought that

Putin, I hoped that Putin would be satisfied with destabilizing Ukraine with that kind of smaller hot war in the East, with the cyber attacks against Ukrainian infrastructure, which caused billions of dollars of damage in the West as well, with the disinformation, with the assassination attacks on Ukraine's leaders right in the heart of the capital. I mean, can you think of anything more destabilizing if there were assassination attempts at key key members of the US government in Washington? I mean, that's pretty frightening, you know, and the list goes on. I had hoped that that would be enough for Putin, so I was really surprised when we saw that buildup in the fall. But in the fall when, you know, it was clear, I mean, almost 200,000 men and countless equipment on three sides of Ukraine. I mean, then it became very, very clear to me that there was going to be an invasion. I mean, you don't do this just to threaten. You do this to act. I was in Ukraine at the beginning of February this year, right before the invasion, and it was startling to me that President Zelensky did not publicly at least seem to think that there was going to be an attack.

Mila Atmos: [00:22:39] We're going to take a quick break to thank our sponsors. Thank you Avast for supporting Future Hindsight. Avast is a global leader in cybersecurity that empowers you with digital safety and privacy no matter who you are, where you are, or how you connect. For more than 30 years, Avast has been trusted by over 435 million users. Enjoy the opportunities that come with being connected on your terms. Avast's new all-in-one solution, Avast One, helps you take control of your safety and privacy online through a range of features. Learn more about Avast One at [Avast.com](https://www.avast.com). Avast features include antivirus, data breach monitoring, and firewall protection. It stops viruses and malware from harming your devices, finds out if your online accounts have been compromised or your passwords need to be changed. And it prevents attacks trying to access your computer or steal your data. My favorite feature is the Firewall Protection. Also, free and premium versions are available. Avast prevents over 1.5 billion attacks every month and with Avast One, you can confidently take control of your online world without worrying about viruses, phishing attacks, ransomware hacking attempts and other cybercrimes. Learn more about Avast One at [Avast.com](https://www.avast.com).

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Mila Atmos: [00:25:33] So the war in Ukraine has been going on for some time now and it's looking more and more like a protracted conflict. And with each day, it feels as though the incredibly high stakes just get higher. Right? Like nuclear weapons, global food security, energy security, and also a test for international cooperation and tenacity on sanctions. What do you think about the US response? Is the US doing enough? Or actually, here is an audience member who had maybe a better way of asking the same question. "What are your views of the right course of action that the US should take right now in supporting Ukraine?"

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:26:12] Yeah. So, you know, this is a really tricky question because, you know, my heart says, you know, we need to go in there and we need to sort it out. But my head says, you know, where the Biden administration is right now, which is that they are navigating this very, very narrow lane between trying to support our NATO allies, the front line states like Poland, trying to provide as much support, whether it's economic, whether it's humanitarian, whether it's security assistance, whether it's intelligence assistance to Ukraine to fight off the Russians and then doing what we can with sanctions and like to deter Russia. So on the one hand, trying to do all of that without widening this war and making the situation perhaps even even more complicated and even more dangerous. And so I think the president is trying to manage the risks while doing all those tasks. And I think it's very difficult because we don't necessarily know where Putin is, you know, so we have probably a battalion of lawyers, maybe even more thinking about what is provocative. And, you know, I want to scream and say "what is provocative is Russia invading Ukraine." That's what's provocative and

anything that Ukraine does in response and that the allies, including the US, doesn't respond, you know, is just meeting that challenge.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:27:35] But of course that's not the world we live in. We need to manage the risk because we are responsible countries, unlike Russia. But we can't let ourselves be deterred because Putin is a bully. And it's my belief that all he understands is strength. And when we sort of pull ourselves back from actions that might be reasonable and completely appropriate, he sees it as a sign of weakness, not as "we are responsible members of the international community, and we don't want to make an already toxic, terrible situation even worse." And I'll tell you why I think that. Back in 1999, when Putin was the prime minister to President Yeltsin, he basically conducted the second Chechen war. And it was brutal and it was terrible. Thousands of people died, including many elderly Russian people who were living in the capital of Chechnya. And as far as I know, as a very junior officer at that time, we barely protested and there were certainly no actions. You know, this was an internal Russian issue. And then fast forward to 2008 and President Putin and the Russian government, they fomented a war against Georgia, one of their neighbors, and they took two chunks of territory from Georgia. And we protested, but we did not implement any sanctions and we did not excommunicate Yeltsin in any way.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:28:59] You know, still received an international circles. So fast forward again to 2014, the first Ukraine war. Putin illegally annexed Crimea. He invaded Donbas in the east, which is, you know, is now much in the news. And then we did protest. We did kick Putin out of the G8, so it became the G7 and we instituted a number of sanctions. It took us a little while, but we instituted sanctions. And it's my belief that that is why Putin stopped where he stopped in Donbas. But he used the eight years between 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 to build up his war chest, to build up his military, apparently not very successfully, and basically make preparations so he could withstand whatever might come his way. And Putin basically miscalculated because the West turned out to be more united under US leadership. The Russian military turned out to be a disaster in part because of corruption. And we can come back to that. And the Ukrainian military, which knew why it was fighting, I mean, this is an existential fight for Ukraine, turned out to be way more motivated and way more capable than Vladimir Putin had realized.

Mila Atmos: [00:30:16] Well, you're saying that Putin miscalculated and his war chest is not as strong, whether that's the money or the people, the troops on the ground, are not as strong as he may have thought they were. So are you worried then that this war can spread westward?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:30:33] Well, sure. I think we all need to be worried about miscalculations, for one thing. You know, a drone going off and ending up in Poland and killing a number of people. You know, there are always mistakes on the battlefield and then there are always calculations. So you had asked me before about nuclear weapons. And I mean, I think that's a very serious concern when you have the president of a nuclear state like Russia and his foreign minister loosely talking about nuclear war, that is very provocative and it's meant to deter us. But that doesn't mean that it isn't concerning. And so, you know, we know that the US military and NATO is looking at this very carefully. I mean, I'm encouraged that what we hear from our military is that they're not seeing the kind of movements that they would expect to see if Russia was actually going to launch a nuke. But today I heard on the news and I suspect we'll hear more from this from the US government and from NATO, that in Kaliningrad, a small portion of Russia which is separated from the mainland of of Russia, that they had sort of a mock drill that included a nuclear attack. Now Kaliningrad is bordered by the Baltic states and I believe also by Poland. Very provocative, very worrisome for those populations. So what does that mean? And, you know, I wish I had a great answer for you, but we can't allow Putin to bully us into saying, "okay. You've got nukes and we're not going to do anything" because that will only embolden him to do more. He's already told us on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine that he thinks there are other countries that should also rejoin the fold of mother Russia. And so if we say, you know, this is too dangerous, that doesn't mean that he's going to put all his nukes away and all of a sudden he's going to be an upstanding international citizen. It just means he's going to do more. That's what we've seen over the last 20 years. During the Cold War, we found ways to manage the risk with Russia. And that's where we need to get back to again. Some of the treaties, some of the important understandings and some of the connections between US leadership, whether on the military or the civilian side and the Russian side, have been frayed. I mean, we are, I don't want to discount it. I mean, we are in a very dangerous moment right now. But we did it during the Cold War. We did it for decades of being able to manage that risk and we can do it again. And so we just

need to figure out how. So I don't want to leave people feeling that this is an impossible task because it's not. It's hard, but it's possible.

Mila Atmos: [00:33:14] You know, you were there at the beginning, basically, of the unraveling of the Soviet Union. And so to rejoin Mother Russia in a way, how do people on the ground actually feel about that? You spent so much of your time on the ground in these countries. If you watch some media, they say, oh, you know, yeah, Ukraine was always part of Russia and the Ukrainians should just rejoin and which of course we know they don't want to do, otherwise they wouldn't be waging this war. But what do you say to people now that you have actually spent so much time in all of these countries that were former Soviet countries? Do they really want to rejoin an empire of sorts?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:33:52] I mean, I am sure that there are some Ukrainians, some Kyrgyz, some Kazakhs who want to rejoin the Russian empire, the Soviet Union. But that's not what most of them want and their governments don't. You know, are reflecting the will of their people. I mean, Zelensky, I mean one of the things you can say about him is he is masterful at reflecting what his people want. And I mean, there's just no desire to return to the fold. And in the case of Ukraine, they've been fighting off the Russians for hundreds of years. So this is part of that resilience and that determination to resist the Russians that we are seeing right now. They've seen this before and they are going to prevail this time. I mean, period, paragraph. I would also note to people that say, you know, these countries were part of Russia. Well, so is Alaska. Does that mean we're going to give up Alaska?

Mila Atmos: [00:34:44] Good point. Good point. So I have a question here from the audience about how we can help the people of Ukraine. What are the organizations that you recommend?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:34:53] Yeah, so I actually have a list that I'm happy to share with you all. I mean, there are so many great organizations. Before I kind of go through the list, I think one of the things to do to support Ukraine and more broadly the democracies of the world, because I think the stakes are far greater than just Ukraine. I think what we can do is individuals can alert their elected representatives, whether it's in the state house or in Washington, that they're watching this and they're concerned and

they want to be supporting Ukraine and, you know, providing those citizen voices that... Our politicians, they want to be re-elected and maybe they will be paying attention. I mean, I have to say, in the House and in the Senate, there is strong bipartisan support for Ukraine. But this is not a short term fight. Unfortunately, this is going to need to be a sustained effort. And American citizens saying we understand what the stakes are and we want to support Ukraine and we want you to do the necessary as our elected representatives, I think is hugely important. And then I think there are many different kinds of charities that provide humanitarian assistance. And I know the leadership of Razom for Ukraine, which is basically a clearinghouse, they vet non-governmental organizations that are providing assistance to Ukraine. They've been doing this since 2014, so they have a good track record. And so that would be one way to go.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:36:19] If you are somebody who believes in freedom of the press, which is I certainly do. I think all Americans do. You know, it's so important for our democracy. And I just recall what Thomas Jefferson said, that if he had to, I mean this is not a quote, obviously, but if he had to choose between a government and the press, he would always choose the press. So there's this organization called The Kyiv Independent, and you can buy a subscription and they will send you every day. They will send you a little update on where Ukraine is now and you can up your membership to get all sorts of exclusive products as well. But I, I read that every single day in English because it's my ability to, you know, get a quick update when I first wake up. And it supports freedom of the press, which is hugely important in Ukraine right now. I'm very optimistic always. And as Ukraine moves forward to a time of peace to ensure that there are still strong, strong press organizations that are going to bring people the truth, because as hard as war is, peace actually can be a lot more challenging. There's also a number of organizations that are providing assistance to the territorial defense organization. So there's the big Ukrainian military and then every community over the last two months has organized. And I mean, these guys need everything.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:37:41] They not only need tactical gear and radios and in some cases drones and on night vision goggles, etc., etc., etc.. They need medical kits. They need the right kind of shoes. And there are a number of organizations that I can provide you the name of the names of that, that, that do that. And then one organization that is very close to my heart is called Mountain Seed Foundation. It started out a number of years ago by some former US embassy employees, Americans providing

assistance to children in Ukraine. But in this year, in 2022, it has started a second effort to provide assistance to the US embassy employees, Ukrainians. These are US government employees, no less than I was or any American is, and they are facing all the same challenges that everybody else in Ukraine is. And so Mountain Seed is doing a great job of helping some of our employees that need a lot of a lot of assistance. And finally, there's an organization called Welcome USA. I'm on the board and they are getting ready to provide assistance to receive Ukrainian refugees into the United States. They started out by helping Afghanistan refugees and now they have broadened out. So a really long answer to your question, but there's a lot of things that people can do and really provide meaningful assistance to the people of Ukraine.

Mila Atmos: [00:39:08] So I kind of want to go to a philosophical question about who we are as people. I'm thinking about Big Tent's Mission and country over party, but also our mission here at Future Hindsight, where we try to find the ways everyday people can engage with these big issues. Can you help us understand how these themes we've discussed today, corruption, Ukraine, the undermining of institutions, how and why these should matter and do matter, in fact, to everyday people?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:39:37] I mean, I think we are in challenging times. There's no question about it. I think that, you know, just taking the domestic portion of it. If we had any doubt at all that our democracy is challenged at the moment here in the United States, all you need to do is look at the January 6th insurrection. And so all of the leaks that are happening and the information that is dribbling out makes it clear that there was, one can only call it a conspiracy to overturn presidential elections. Elections are the very foundation of a democracy. So I'm hoping that the January 6th committee and the hearings that are coming up will provide us with a lot of information and a lot of answers and some accountability for not just the people who invaded the capitol and committed violence, but those who organized it and planned it. You know, there needs to be accountability for this, not because we want to look backwards necessarily. Because we want to look forward. And accountability is, again, one of the hallmarks of a country that is a rule of law, country where it is not, you know, the rule of men, that if you're a president or if you're close to the president or if you are rich, you get off because you have special privileges. We need to be a country that is a rule of law country where everybody is held accountable if they are guilty of crime.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:41:03] I think that is pretty important. And I would also say that I think our democracy is tied very closely to our diplomacy. Ronald Reagan used to talk about how we are the shining city on the hill, and I still believe we are. Maybe it's a little bit tarnished, but we are still the shining city on the hill. But we need to get our act together and continue to provide that inspiration to other countries. Because I'm thinking back to George Kennan, probably the most famous diplomat of the 1900s. He was a Russia expert. And in a telegram back to the US government, he, he basically said to fight the Russians we need to be strong at home. Our values are our biggest asset and we need to make sure that our democracy is strong and our economy is strong. It's not the military that makes the U.S. what it is. As important as our strong military is, it's our values. And I think that is still true today. And when our country is strong or democracy is strong, that gives our diplomacy, you know, it gives you wind under your wings. Right. And I look out at the world today, and I think we are very challenged. We have been challenged. But now after February 24th, when the Russians invaded, I think. Looking back, we're not going to look at this as simply Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We're going to look at this as how did the leaders of today, the United States, but also other leaders around the world meet this moment? Because it is clear that we are being challenged in many different ways and we need to define what those challenges are.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:42:45] I mean, yes, there's nuclear, but there's also other challenges like cyber wars and disinformation, which is so corrosive to so many countries around the world. And the list goes on. I mean, what are those challenges? How do we define them? How do we address them? And we need to look at the institutions we have, the tools we have. Some of them are good and some of them need to be reformed. Like for example, the UN. Maybe we need new institutions and tools. We, I think, are at a moment like we were at the end of World War II when our forefathers said, you know, never again. We're not going to have this kind of death and destruction. We're going to set up new rules for the international order, and it's going to be about the viability of borders, sovereignty, etc., etc., etc.. And they over decades, they set up new institutions like the UN, like the international financial institutions, etc. We need to look at all that and figure out what do we need to keep, what do we need to reform, what do we need to create anew for the new challenges that that we're being faced with today?

Mila Atmos: [00:43:55] So much to do, but it sounds like you are super hopeful. I mean, I know you're an optimist. You mentioned that already. And so here's my final question. Looking into the future, when we think about the world, the new world order that is going to emerge, when all is said and done, what what makes you hopeful?

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:44:13] Well. So I think sometimes being hopeful is an act of discipline. You know, I think about Colin Powell, who was, of course, a military man. He became secretary of state. I was a relatively junior officer. And he had these 13 rules. And one of them is that optimism is a force multiplier. So we can go into this situation, the challenges that we're facing right now and go, "Oh, my God, there's just no way we can solve all these things. What are we going to do?" Or we can say, "you know, we got some real problems here and we are going to solve them and how are we going to do that and what are you going to do? What are you going to do? How do we break it up into small problems that each of us can, can, can tackle and so forth." Because, you know, if you are optimistic, that spreads. And I'll give you two examples of why I am optimistic today. The first is here in America, where I deal with a lot of students and they are just as optimistic and ready to tackle problems and excited about their new careers or their careers to be as I was when I was that age, even though some of us are maybe a little a little more jaded. Young people aren't, and it is their world and they are going to solve these problems. And then the other thing that makes me optimistic along the lines of what Colin Powell said is, I mean, who thought that the Ukrainian military was going to be able to push back Russia? Who thought that? Very few people. I didn't think that I knew that they'd give a good fight. I didn't think we'd see the kind of successes that we see now. But that is not only an example of capabilities, but it is an example of the will and the desire to achieve success and victory. And that's that's the spirit that we need, I think, in all of our endeavors in order to move forward.

Mila Atmos: [00:46:00] Well, thank you very much for those words of wisdom and those hopeful words. Thank you very much for joining us, Ambassador. It was really a pleasure to have you on Big Tent.

Marie Yovanovitch: [00:46:09] Thank you.

Mila Atmos: [00:46:15] Next time on Future Hindsight. It's primary season, but are these contests serving democracy or harming it?

John Opdycke: [00:46:23] I think part of the subtext of reforming the primary system is forcing a conversation about the role the parties play in controlling every aspect of political life in this country. I think it's a conversation whose time has come.

Mila Atmos: [00:46:39] Next week on Future Hindsight, I'll be joined by John Opdycke, president of Open Primaries. John's an independent political activist and strategist who says it's time to shake up the closed party primary system.

Mila Atmos: [00:46:52] This episode was produced by Zack Travis and Sara Burningham. Until next time, stay engaged.

The Democracy Group: [00:47:08] This podcast is part of the Democracy Group.