

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

Brookings presidents on how the Institution and public policy
have changed over the decades

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[music]

TALBOTT: The centenary, which is a once in institutional lifetime, it's an opportunity to step back a little bit, take stock of what we have done, how we have changed over the years, and how the world has changed over the years.

DEWS: That's Brookings sixth and current president Strobe Talbott, reflecting on the Institution he leads that was founded a century ago. I'm Fred Dews, and this is the Brookings Cafeteria, a podcast about ideas and the experts who have them.

In honor of our first century and looking ahead to our second, I'm doing a short series of episodes that focuses on the people and the history of this organization that I've been lucky to be a part of for 20 years now. Last month, I sat down with the two co-chairs of the Brookings Board of Trustees, John Thornton and David Rubenstein. Next month, I'll talk to current and past scholars, as well as Brookings friends. And in this episode, I'll share with you my conversations with Strobe and the fourth president of Brookings, Bruce MacLaury, who look ahead to the major policy challenges that Brookings should take on while they reflect on their own periods of leading Brookings.

Strobe continued his reflection of being at the helm of Brookings as it turns 100.

TALBOTT: [I've] been spending quite a bit of time reading not only institutional history, that is to say, the founding of the institution, but also what the world looked like between 1914 and 1916, which is essentially one of the precursor of the forerunner of the Brookings Institution was established.

But also by, by coincidence we've turned 100 just about the time that we became \$100 million a year operation, which is kind of a round number that suggests maybe step back again and look at exactly how efficient are we. Are we right sized? Is our growth smart growth? We've expanded considerably over the nearly 14 years that I've been here. And then look out at the world and see if there are basic and broad-gauge issues that we should be looking at. And the answer is yes, there are.

DEWS: Looking ahead to our second century is important to us here at Brookings. But looking back reminds us that this Institution has always been at the forefront of the most important policy challenges of the day.

MACLAURY: I'm Bruce MacLaury and I became president of the Brookings Institution back in 1977, a long time ago.

DEWS: Bruce had been a Treasury Department official, served at the OECD in Paris, and was president of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve before he came to Brookings as its fourth president, replacing Kermit Gordon. Strobe had been a journalist at Time magazine for 21 years, followed by service as president Bill Clinton's deputy secretary of state and ambassador-at-large for the New Independent States of the Soviet Union. I asked both of them why they took the job of president of Brookings.

TALBOTT: It wasn't a hard choice. I had known Brookings up close, as it were, for a long time. When I was in Washington as a journalist, I frequently hiked up

Connecticut Avenue--that's where the Time bureau was--to Massachusetts Avenue to talk with experts on a variety of subjects that I was writing articles about. When I was in the government for eight years, on several occasions, I came over here to not only give talks explaining American foreign policy--I was in the State Department--I also relied very much on several Brookings scholars of that era to give advice, and, as it were, constructive criticisms of American policy. That was a very impressive experience for me. So, when the opportunity came of being able to be part of the Brookings community, I jumped at it.

MACLAURY: I was intrigued by coming to Brookings for one very particular reason. One of the scholars at the time, one of the most famous of our alumni, unfortunately no longer alive, was Arthur Okun. And he had given a series of lectures at Harvard called the Godkin Lectures. And they were called "Efficiency and Effectiveness: The Big Trade Off." And I had read that, and I was very intrigued by his take on this issue for the American public, if you will, of how, on the one hand, we can have a democracy in the political sense of one person, one vote working toward that, at least ideally. And on the other hand, an economic system which we call capitalism or guided capitalism that relies on inequality, if you will, or at least permits it if it doesn't rely on it, to provide the incentives for innovation and improvement, growth.

So, this juxtaposition of political democracy and economic inequality was what Arthur was looking at. And that's what intrigued me about coming to the Brookings. If people were here thinking about those big issues, I would be delighted to be part of that discussion.

DEWS: Bruce served as president until 1995, when Mike Armacost, former ambassador to Japan and the Philippines and a former State Department official, took over as Brookings fifth president. I regret that he wasn't able to join me for an interview.

So, what did Straub and Bruce find when they got to Brookings? The people, the organization, the state of the Institution. That is, what was Brookings itself like when they arrived, and what did they see as the initial challenges and solutions?

TALBOTT: Overall, I found the institution that I was, uh, now a part of to be in terrific shape when I came to Brookings. Much credit, uh, certainly to my immediate predecessor, Mike Armacost and his predecessor, Bruce MacLaury. But also to the extraordinary staff of the institution, which, is, of course includes what is now a little more than 100 scholars, but it also includes a lot of people like you, Fred and me, who are support staff to the Institution.

That said, I did fairly early on see, along with some advantages to the way in which we're structured, namely what is now a five program division of labor within the institution, I could see some disadvantages, too. And the principal one was what is sometimes called siloing or stovepiping. And it was quite clear to me that colleagues and scholars in one program tended to, if they were collaborating to collaborate with people also in that program. There were some exceptions to that, but they were fairly exceptional.

So, one of the things that I and the management team, with a lot of support from quite a few of the scholars, has been to open up the architecture, as it were, of the

Institution, so that you'll have economists working with political scientists, working with people who have direct experience of being in government and people who also bring a, a different perspective geographically, that is people from other countries who are looking at issues that we're dealing with here at the United, in the United States.

And one reason for pushing that idea, we call it a developing or promoting a, a culture of collaboration, is that the the big issues that we're dealing with in the world are not pigeonholed themselves in one discipline as opposed to another. If they're almost always going to be political and geopolitical and economic and social and cultural dimensions to it. So that begs for opening up the, the way in which we do our work so that you have teams with different skills working on those issues.

DEWS: As I said, I've been here for 20 years, one-fifth of Brookings life span. So when I had the chance to talk to a man who became president of Brookings just after the organization turned 60, I was excited to learn more. For example, I asked Bruce if he knew the origin of the titles our scholars carry, of senior fellow and nonresident senior fellow. Were there ever resident scholars?

MACLAURY: The first president was, who stayed, I think, for 25 years or so, was a squash player. And he had built in the early Brookings building a squash court so that he could indulge his skills in that area. And I am told, though I had no knowledge of it personally, that there was a dormitory, a dormitory so that there were, in fact, people in residence in that sense of the term.

Later decades, the term resident senior fellow was our staff. But over time, more and more, we kept relationships with people in academia who had an affiliation with the Brookings Institution, and they became known as nonresident senior fellows, if you will.

DEWS: That first president of Brookings, by the way, was Harold Moulton, who had been a University of Chicago economist. The first headquarters of Brookings was a building on Jackson Place near the White House, which Brookings occupied until moving to its Massachusetts Avenue building in 1960. Moulton served as president until 1952, when Robert Caulkins, an economist and educator, took the helm. Brookings's third president was Kermit Gordon, who had served as director of the U.S. Bureau of the Budget during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. And Bruce MacLaury succeeded him in 1977.

Bruce told me another interesting historical nugget, this one related to the fact that our website domain is dot edu rather than dot org.

MACLAURY: And I was not around at the time, but many people would have no idea that the early Brookings, I mean, late '20s, early '30s, was a degree granting institution. And so our pedigree, if you will, and our history goes back in the earliest times to have justified the edu, if you will, from the beginning. I'm afraid the Depression came along and wiped out our efforts to be and be perceived as a viable graduate school, which we were early on for a number of years. I think it was maybe 5 or 6 years or so.

And when I came in '77, there were still a few people whom I met who carried a Brookings graduate degree. There're not many, but there were survivors and that that I think that characterization and that, if you will, across cutting edge of Brookings accomplishments stays with us to this day.

DEWS: He explained that by getting the dot edu domain, we were able to demonstrate to the world that we were a solid educational institution, and the dot edu domain symbolized the solid analytical base for the positions our scholars were and are taking.

And I really did thank him because my Brookings career has been intertwined with Brookings dot edu from my first days. Strobe had something similar to say on the domestic and global public education role of Brookings.

TALBOTT: We are increasingly a global institution. And because of the extraordinary new capacity we have to communicate with instantaneously with audiences around the world, we see ourselves as in the dot edu, that is to say public education business, which we hope because of the quality and objectivity of what we put out, people will be a little bit more knowledgeable and therefore able to be responsible and active citizens.

DEWS: In these interviews, I also explored what the domestic and international scenes were like, what policy challenges each new Brookings president faced as he came into his position. Strobe arrived in June 2002, less than a year after the 9-11 terrorist attacks and before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Bruce arrived at the start of the Carter administration and at a time of difficult economic circumstances in the United States.

TALBOTT: 2002 was in the early phase of the George W Bush administration. And it was right after 9-11, I came within months after the towers went down. And it was clear that the conflict that drew the United States into the greater Middle East was going to escalate. It was already apparent that the conflict was going to involve much more than Afghanistan, namely Iraq. And so that was a very big issue. But there were also a number of domestic issues, particularly having to do, uh, with the recovery from the Great Recession.

MACLAURY: Well, as I said, I came in the 1977 and the '70s, if I can characterize them in economic terms, were a decade of stagflation. And that was not supposed to happen in economic and analytical terms. There was something called the Phillips Curve, which said that there's a tradeoff between inflation on the one hand and employment or unemployment on the other. And that you, if you had too much inflation, you could take care of that by slowing the economy. It would, yes, it would increase some unemployment along the way. But there was a system, a theoretical system of tradeoffs that allowed the economy to be regulated, if you will.

And what the 1970s showed us that that trade off had somehow and otherwise disappeared. Many people attributed that to structural changes in the economy coming off the 1960s with huge guns and butter as well. And so, we were left in the 1970s with a conundrum, the stagflation, so-called. So, that was the, I'd say, the overriding domestic economic issue of the times.

The stagflation on domestic side had its counterpart, at least in my recollection, of U.S. relations with the then Soviet Union. It was our nemesis. We were trying to get along as best we could in confrontation with them. And the whole issue of nuclear deterrence, on the one hand, and nuclear proliferation on the other, that I thought at the time, as I was coming into the Brookings Institution, those were the issues that where I felt that Brookings could make its greatest contribution by trying to deal with that stark existential, if you will, set of issues.

DEWS: Later in this episode, you'll hear both Strobe and Bruce talk about the policy issues they think Brookings scholars should look at in its second century. But first, let's look at how the landscape of public policy research and analysis has changed since 1977 and since 2002. Bruce observed two key differences over the nearly 40-year span from the start of his presidency to today.

MACLAURY: I think there's at least two strands that demand differences. One is the simply the proliferation of think tanks as organizations. One cannot call it, I think, a think tank industry or category because each one of them is sui generis. Each one has its own strengths and weaknesses and and claims to fame. So, but but the fact of the matter in the in the '70s, there was a proliferation of the idea of think tanks. We were the granddaddy having started back in the roots go back to 1916, I believe it is.

And at the same time, a proliferation of business lobbyists on K Street, figuratively, that were plying their trade.

So, this is all background to saying that I think that Brookings has a different set of competitors today than it did in the earlier days. There are many more in the field who have claims to fame, pretensions to fame. And there are many more lobbyists, a an explosion, if you will, of lobbyists pursuing particular interests.

So, I'd say the first difference today is that Brookings is contending in a world of many voices and many interested voices, and to try to be, this is a pejorative says sense and to say in a way, but I would say the Carnegie Public Library, that is to say, a font and foundation of knowledge in the world that is not plying or out to seek one particular outcome, but rather the common good. I think that's that distinguishes Brookings challenge.

The other is the revolution in communications, of which I'm sure you and anyone looking around is aware. The internet has changed everything in this sense. And social networks have changed everything. So, the the notion that one can sit around with a few leaders and decide what should be done is long since gone.

DEWS: Strobe also spoke about two major changes that he's seen in the think tank sector since 2002: political polarization and the change in philanthropic culture.

TALBOTT: There are two changes in particular that affect us and our colleagues on what we call think tank row. One is the polarization of our politics has made it both harder to adhere to a nonpartizan position, but also more important to adhere to that kind of position. We like to think of ourselves in this extremely divisive atmosphere here in Washington, to be a kind of oasis of open civil discourse and debate, a kind of oasis of non, non-partisanship.

The other change, which is external, but affects the way in which we go about our business, is that the philanthropic culture is changing. Not in a way that I would characterize as bad or problematic, but it does require us to think hard about how in a world where philanthropists are increasingly interested in how their money is going to be spent, which is, it's their money and their prerogative, but it puts an additional onus on us when we take their money, when we accept contributions or of what we like to think of as investments in what we are doing, that we make absolutely 100% sure that there are no strings attached. That the donor does not think that he she or it can influence either how we do our research or the conclusions that we draw from it.

DEWS: Nonpartisanship is one of the core values of the Brookings Institution. And both presidents spoke to it. Bruce brought it up in the context of how Brookings was perceived by the media and policymaking communities of the 1970s, and Strobe drew a connection between nonpartisanship and reputation in the policymaking community.

MACLAURY: I shuddered each time I read in the press "the esteemed Brookings Institution, the Democrat think tank." And that was, I won't call it an epithet, but it was a characterization that had some basis in fact, though a lot more effort to put all think tanks, if you will, into bottles and categories. And it, I thought, did a great disservice to the breadth of knowledge and points of view that already were extant at Brookings at the time that I came.

But in dealing with the media, one of the things that I and we tried to do was to be perceived, as I believe we really, truly were, as evenhanded and bipartisan, or nonpartisan, depending upon the issues and not perceived as in one camp or the other.

TALBOTT: Well, I think the public sector, which includes, of course, primarily here in Washington the federal government, there is a healthy degree of respect for Brookings for a couple of reasons. The two that I would stress most are, first of all, our scholars of the are of the highest quality. They have reputations not only for expertise but also for being fair minded.

And that leads into the other advantage that we have. Not that there aren't other think tanks that can claim the same. But I think one of our distinct advantages is the degree to which we are scrupulously nonpartisan. While Republican and Democratic administrations come and go, we find that we can get a good hearing from officials in those administrations, and our own scholars have come out of both Republican and Democratic administrations and worked here. And we've had scholars go into new administrations.

DEWS: I did not coordinate the two interviews at all. And yet, both Strobe and Bruce had remarkably similar things to say about Brookings's impact in the policy community. Here's Strobe explaining why we are outsiders whom insiders respect, followed by a similar comment from Bruce on the value of the institution to the public sector.

TALBOTT: We have excellent relations with governments around the world and levels of government here in the United States, not just the federal, but also those of

states and metropolitan areas. So, we are outsiders whom the insiders respect, and we are quite successful in coming up with ideas that they are just plain too busy and also constrained by their jobs from coming up with. And they are appreciative of our, our ideas.

MACLAURY: I know from my own governmental service at the Treasury Department and in the Federal Reserve that when one was on the job, one does not have time to think big thoughts. It is what's happening today and tomorrow that overwhelm one's psyche, if you will, as a government executive.

So, providing perspective based on both knowledge on the one hand and experience, and I emphasize both of those--knowledge and experience, knowledge is not alone is not enough people. I think the best of Brookings, the Alice Rivlin of the world, there aren't many of them have been and served in government. They know what the issues are and and the pressures that come to bear, both political and intellectual, in government.

And Brookings, to me, has the luxury of a training ground as well as a spokesperson role in helping public servants keep perspective in their daily job. And so, that's that's one continuing, I think, value that a Brookings, a think tank, can provide.

DEWS: Okay. So, let's look ahead. What challenges and issues do a former and the current president of Brookings think are on the horizon? Here's Strobe describing four of the chief domestic and global problems.

TALBOTT: Well, if you look at our essential profession here, it's, it's problem solving. And that means having a sense as early as possible, anticipatory, if possible, what the big problems are going to be. And, somewhat unfortunately, but at least we're getting a heads up on it, we know what some of the really big problems are going to be for the next couple of decades. And in some cases, for the for the future is beyond what we can see.

I'm thinking here particularly about climate change, which we have done a lot of work on. I've, I'm allowed occasionally to impersonate a scholar myself and write books and do my own scholarship. And I've done quite a bit of that on climate change. So, there's that. It doesn't mean that we're going to be on the cutting edge of the hard science, but we are going to be very much, I hope, on the cutting edge of the policy challenges that energy policy and and climate change are going to require.

And then there's the changing nature of the United States of America. We've been through a demographic revolution that has affected, I would say, almost, well, certainly decisively for the better in the diversity and rich richness of our population. It's had an effect on our politics, as has been apparent in the last couple of presidential elections. And then it has had an effect on the economy, which I would say is net positive, the fact that a lot of migrants have come in, immigrants have come into the United States over the last couple of decades has allowed us to have a degree of resilience in hard times that other developed countries have not had. So, there's that.

And then, of course, there is the unfortunate and really quite dangerous turn that Russia has made in recent years. And China too, is at least in some ways, and

particularly in its handling of maritime and territorial disputes, become more aggressive. So, we're seeing some resurgence of the kind of geopolitics that brought the world to war in past centuries.

And then, of course, there's the the terrible phenomenon of ISIS, which we haven't begun to get our hands around.

DEWS: Bruce, too, said that Brookings needs to be thinking about the social and economic consequences of global warming and the disruptions it is causing and will cause. Then Bruce walked me through another issue that's on his mind.

MACLAURY: Well, the whole notion of how human beings, we, are going to be employed or not employed in the future. It's not a new issue. I mean, from the very time of the agricultural revolution into the Industrial Revolution, if you will, people have been dispossessed first from the farms and then from the factories and then from the service economy. And so, the question is not a new question, but at each each generation or each century, if you will, or each decade nowadays, with the advancement of, of technology raises its own issues in that set of issue areas I think.

The other area I'm much less certain about, but I am intrigued by and those are the advances in neuroscience, the era of the brain and the now notion of the malleability of the brain, which which is in now, in the last few decades a new idea. Combining that with nanotechnology on the other hand, that the whole interface between human beings and technology and the world of things and the social and political consequences of that nexus is, I would say, something that we ought to be giving thought to again, in terms of the social and political and economic consequences, rather than the hard science as such. But that's a pretty big agenda for another century.

DEWS: Well, that's about it for this episode. Looking back and looking forward. I want to thank both Bruce MacLaury and Strobe Talbott for their time and insight in these interviews and their leadership of this organization. In his reflection on leading Brookings during its centenary year, Strobe emphasized another enduring core value that connects our past to our future.

TALBOTT: We have for some time now, been looking at our overall mission going back 100 years, and with the more than 100 scholars that are here, and boiling that mission down to one phrase, which is improving governance. And the the function of governance, which is much broader than just what governments per se do, is changing in some ways that are complex and in some ways that are creating problems of their own, but also creating opportunities.

So, I think looking at our basic book of business, looking at the mission that we have adhered to over the last century, we are properly using our centenary to make some adjustments that I'm quite confident our predecessors would be proud of and would support.

[music]

DEWS: Bruce, too, offered his unique perspective on another Brookings value a commitment to the common good in a way that draw strength from our past and looks to the future.

MACLAURY: This is a world of special interests. I mentioned lobbyists before. You pay to play, crudely. And that's not what Brookings is, has been, or I trust will be. So, I emphasize both the passion and the commitment and the common good. It's that nexus that makes Brookings, I think, unique in the world. And I hope we never lose that uniqueness.

DEWS: And that's it for this episode of the Brookings Cafeteria. My thanks to our audio engineer and producer, Zach Kulzer, with editing help from Mark Hoelscher. Plus, thanks to Carissa Nietzsche, Jessica Pavone, Erica Abalahin, Rebecca Viser, and our intern Sarah Abdul Rahim. Also, thanks to Amanda Mays for her help in coordinating these interviews.

You can subscribe to the Brookings Cafeteria on iTunes and listen to it in all the usual places. You can send feedback email to bcp at brookings dot edu. Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.