

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

Brookings Cafeteria Podcast:  
Syrian refugees and Western inaction

Friday, September 16, 2016

**PARTICIPANTS:**

**Host:**

FRED DEWS

BILL FINAN

**Contributors:**

ROBERT MCKENZIE  
Nonresident Senior Fellow - Foreign Policy  
The Brookings Institution

LEON WIESELTIER  
Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow in Culture and Policy - Foreign Policy,  
Governance Studies  
The Brookings Institution

ELIZABETH MANN  
Fellow - Governance Studies, Brown Center on Education Policy  
The Brookings Institution

DON KETTL  
Nonresident Senior Fellow - Governance Studies  
Dean of the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland  
The Brookings Institution

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, a podcast about ideas and the experts who have them; I'm Fred Dews. On September 19, during the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the UN will host a heads of state and government summit to address the issue of refugees and migrants worldwide. The plight of Syrian refugees is of particular importance. Since the outbreak of civil war in Syria over five years ago an estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes with over 4.8 million leaving the country and the rest displaced within Syria. Neighboring countries such as Turkey Lebanon and Jordan have taken in the vast majority of these men, women, and children. Germany has registered over 600,000 Refugees. The Obama administration set a goal of resettling 10,000 Syrian refugees.

Here to talk about the moral and political dimensions of the refugee crisis, our guest host Bob McKenzie, a visiting fellow in our center for Middle East policy, and a previous guest of the show, and Leon Wieseltier, the Isaiah Berlin senior fellow in culture and policy at Brookings. Stay tuned in this episode to meet a new scholar in our brown center on education policy. And then listen to a discussion with Don Kettl, author of a new Brookings book on reclaiming the progressive spirit of better government. And now over to Bobby McKenzie and Leon Wieseltier.

MCKENZIE: Thanks Fred; we're grateful for your having us and thank you Leon for being here with us.

WIESELTIER: It's a pleasure Bob.

MCKENZIE: Leon, I'd like to talk to you today a little bit about the situation in Syria. would you mind giving your views on where you see things stand right now?

WIESELTIER: I wouldn't mind at all; they're minority views so I'm happy to proliferate them far and wide. I think that the disgraceful policy pursued by the Obama white house in Syria is bearing its inevitable fruit. I think that we are further and further away from the political settlement that we want in Syria, primarily because we refuse to use the military force that would change the facts on the battlefield that would actually be the condition for the diplomatic solution that they want. We are standing by idly as atrocities multiply we are, we have allowed the Russians to exploit the vacuum that we created in Syria, the big power vacuum I mean, and we're watching Putin almost unbelievably emerged as a regional power and even a global geopolitical power and Syria is one of the places where he's, shall we say, signaling his intentions for the next period in Russian history, the refugees continue to pose a huge threat to the countries around Syria that, in which they found haven.

The refugees in Europe continued to seem, to be marooned in various places and as a consequence, you know, one way to think of it is this, I sometimes, that as a consequence, as a direct or indirect consequence of American in action in Syria, we have witnessed the following: a secular tyranny, a religious tyranny, chemical warfare, barrel bombs, the torture of children, the displacement of 11 million people, the destabilization or potential destabilization of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, the refugee crisis in Europe, the emergence of Russia as a geopolitical power, and the resurgence of fascism in Europe; our inaction is the gift that keeps on giving.

MCKENZIE: Let me ask you Leon, and I mean, in short what you've just sketched out there is that Syria has been an engine for enormous human suffering, but I want to just ask you about two photos; one in this past August with a young child

covered in debris and blood and then in September 2015, the young child who was drowned in the Mediterranean Sea and washed along the shore. Those photos gripped public attention across the U.S. and yet we've still seen inaction. One would think that such incidents humanize the crisis.

WIESELTIER: I think there are a number of things to be said about that; the first one is that when Jesus said that the truth shall set you free, he was wrong. It's astonishing how much one can know and not act, because it really is not just about the mind it's also about the will and for various reasons we have lacked the will to act. One of those reasons is the president, probably the primary reason, who is dogmatic and even proud about his policy in Syria.

The other is that the repeated imagery of atrocity has the unfortunate and darkly ironic effect of an anesthetizing people to it as well, you know, I was raised on the thought that if only NBC or ABC, CNN didn't exist yet when I was a boy, if only NBC or ABC had been at Auschwitz something, would have been done. And then I remember thinking about this as I watched the siege of Sarajevo for two-and-a-half years, every night Christiane Amanpour reporting on further, on the day's atrocities and it didn't matter and in other words the excuse that we didn't know what was happening was no longer available to us and to our leaders and it didn't matter, it took a long time to get us into Bosnia.

And now of course there's YouTube and YouTube, I mean YouTube shows, for anyone who's interested in seeing, and I don't- it's very rough viewing. I mean all the atrocities were talking about, YouTube is full of beheadings and mass executions and ethnic cleansings and chemical attacks, it's all there and so we don't, not only do we no

longer have the excuse of ignorance, it's more depressing than that, we now know that even with knowledge, we need reasons and purposes to act and we need leaders who share those reasons and purposes.

MCKENZIE: In terms of public opinion and discourse, there is strong disagreement or debate in the US on whether or not we should take more refugees and specifically whether or not we should we resettle more Syrian refugees. The Ford administration, however, faced similar push back in the seventies. In 1975, President Ford issued guidance to his administration and we brought over nearly a hundred and seventy-five thousand Vietnamese refugees so what are your thoughts on what the administration should do-

WIESELTIER: I think that the president is hiding behind his perception of public opinion, is what I think. When public opinion doesn't suit him, he fights. Public opinion prior to the campaign for Obamacare was really deeply against Obamacare and that didn't dissuade him and it didn't daunt him, rightly so, he rolled up his sleeves, he went out, and as they like to say, he got it done. I think that the American people, despite the eruptions of nativism and other forms of xenophobic ugliness that Trump has been exploiting, I think the American people are fundamentally a decent people, even in times of economic distress. I think that when there are beheadings or other atrocities, the polls actually show compassion, they don't show hard-heartedness. I think that the -- it requires political courage right now in this political season to argue for a larger number than the 10,000 that we might finally accept and nobody's showing this political courage, nobody, not Obama, not Harry Reid, not Chuck Schumer, this is an argument that needs to be made to Democrats, not just to Republicans. And, you know the, it is a

matter of national honor, it has to do with the very essence of this country and its public philosophy that we offer refuge to the oppressed and that we welcome immigrants because they refresh our society in every way and they are our strongest barrier against social decadence.

MCKENZIE: I'd suspect that the administration would push back and they would say we take, we resettle 70,000 refugees a year, we've taken 800,000 refugees since 9/11, we have resettled more refugees through formal channels than any other country, what would you say to that?

WIESELTIER: I would say that the Syrian refugee crisis is just that, it's a crisis, it's an enormous crisis and that the number of 10,000 is a parsimonious number; we are a large country and even now we are prosperous country and we are a good country. Canada is taking close to 30,000, which is not a spectacular number but Canada, the government has arranged all sorts of structures for the reception and absorption of these refugees and Justin Trudeau actually went to the airport to meet them. Can you imagine Barack Obama going to the airport to meet refugees? it's almost out of the question and that would, that would create a moral climate in which the citizens of this country recognize our obligations, remember the thing about refugees is they also have rights, this is, we're not just talking about charity here, they also have rights and in the, and the plight of the Syrian refugees is partly, not completely, but partly the result, the fault of Western inaction against what Assad was doing to his country. They are fleeing a situation, quite rightly, that we had the power to prevent, had the interests to prevent it, had the values that would justify prevention, and nonetheless did not lift almost a finger to prevent it.

MCKENZIE: I also suspect that the administration would say that as a result of all of this, they are trying to move things forward, they are putting forward a rather large summit in September, UN General Assembly, what would you say to that?

WIESELTIER: I would say that there's a long history of summits and conferences about refugees and people in trouble, I think that what really will matter is whether or not the administration will have the courage to take in a substantially larger number of refugees and whether or not the administration will have the courage to explain to Congress and to the American people why it would be doing so and specifically what I have in mind is that whether or not the administration would finally have the courage to explain to the country why Syrian refugees pose almost no security risk whatsoever.

The administration, including the president has not pushed back in any significant way against the fear that some Americans have and it's not, it's an irrational fear, but it's not a fear that's too hard to understand, that somehow we'd be letting in people who want to kill us and that's just not the case.

MCKENZIE: And it's worth noting, of the 800,000 refugees that the US resettled since 9/11, five, only five have been arrested on terrorism charges.

WIESELTIER: Absolutely, most of the terrorism that happens in this country happen by people who live here, not by people who come here. Anyway, as I once said at a meeting, you know, between 1880 and 1924, the United States took in four million immigrants from Italy and with those Italian immigrants we got Enrico Fermi, and Joe DiMaggio, and Fiorello LaGuardia, and Frank Sinatra, and Al Capone. And does anyone in their right mind think that the Italian immigration to America was a mistake, a colossal mistake, because we got the Mafia?

MCKENZIE: Sure.

WIESELTIER: I mean, people who talk this way are actually people who oppose immigration and the admission of refugees on other grounds, I mean we're talking about nativism here not about national security fears.

MCKENZIE: Donald Trump has certainly tapped into that this election cycle.

WIESELTIER: Very happily.

MCKENZIE: Do you think that the administration should be responding more forcefully to that?

WIESELTIER: I don't think the administration should be responding more forcefully to Trump but I think that given the astonishing number of deportations that the Obama administration has presided over, given the absence of immigration reform, given the president's, I mean, cold heatedness, stone heartedness about Syria, given the preposterously, shamefully low number that we've agreed to accept, we'll see if, they all, if we live up to the 10,000. given all this, the White House is somewhat complicit in creating a climate in which the denigration of immigrants and the delegitimation of refugees is, becomes part of the discourse. I'm not blaming Obama for what Trump is saying. Trump is to blame for that and so are the 14 million people who voted for him in the primaries but there is almost nobody speaking up on the other side in a full-throated unembarrassed way without any to be sure sentences about the historical and moral primacy of immigrants and refugees to this country.

MCKENZIE: You and I put together a couple of events this year, February 19<sup>th</sup>, you and I organized an event with Syrian American leaders and later that day, in a very public way, we had a discussion that you moderated with Syrian refugees. Would you



talk a little bit about not only those events, but how interactions with both Syrian American leaders as well as Syrian refugees has colored your own thinking on the situation.

WIESELTIER: Well as a consequence of my engagement in this issue, I've met some of the most remarkable people I've ever met. Frankly, I expected them to be remarkable because I'm the son of refugees and I know about the inner resources of refugees and I know about the beauty of refugees, the moral beauty of refugees. They are extraordinary people there are people who never give up, they are people who start again, and again, and again, they are people who are prepared to lose everything for the sake of their children. I mean, you know, they are extraordinary people and I've met extraordinary Syrians and who have become good friends.

You will recall that first event that we did, our reasoning I think to this day was it was simple and right, which is that we were tired of hearing only from the suits about this, I know you're not allowed to curse the suits at Brookings but we were tired of hearing only from the suits and we thought to ourselves, you know what, we want to hear from the refugees themselves, they can represent themselves, and sure enough, thanks to your efforts, we found some extraordinary people and, you know, I moderated the discussion but I have to say, I was, it was, one of the humblest afternoons of my life, I mean basically I gave a little preface as you recall about what a refugee is and then I too just sat and listened riveted and wrapped to the accounts that these men and women gave their own experiences.

And it was important because in all policy matters it's essential never to lose sight of the human dimension of the policy and what I wanted was for the people in that room

and the people who later watched it to encounter the human reason for the agitation of people like ourselves about our Syrian policy. It's very important, you know there are on the one side, there are all the numbers, and all the metrics, and all the statistical quantitative work that needs to be done in the formulation of almost any policy but on the other side are the human beings, who are the reasons for the policy and it was very important I thought to keep a consciousness of those human beings very alive and vivid in the minds of our colleagues but more generally so that it be vivid to the debate.

MCKENZIE: One would hope that some of those voices would be included in the upcoming summit in September.

WIESELTIER: I hope, I mean I have to say, I do not have, I don't have great hopes for what's going to happen, I mean I had a friend at Brookings many years ago, very funny man, who every time he'd read an article about a crisis in the newspaper he'd look at me and he'd say, "now there's a conference building measure," he would say. And you know I don't, there are very, very few White House conferences that have yielded anything, anything significant and again, we're talking about an emergency, we're talking about something in which time really is of the essence and we've lost as much ground as we have and so much suffering has taken place because we decided, when the refugee crisis exploded last fall, I think it was October or November, when the exodus began across the Mediterranean, the White House decided that it was time to have a conference about refugees and it scheduled it for 11 months later, which struck me as itself a sign.

DEWS: Let's take a quick break here for another coffee break, your chance to hear from a new education policy scholar at Brookings. Then we'll get back to the discussion on Syrian refugees.

MANN: My name is Elizabeth Mann and I'm a fellow in the brown center on education policy. I grew up in a wonderful, small Midwestern town called East Grand Rapids, it's just outside of Grand Rapids on the western side of the state in Michigan and really what you might think of when you think of kind of an ideal like small Midwestern town, everyone kind of goes to the football game on Friday night, stuff like that, you know, you run into your teachers at the grocery store, so it was a really great place to grow up. I grew up with my mom, my mom and my dad, but my mom spent her career as a public prosecutor so that really was kind of a window into, for me, into how government works and how it can be a force for good for a lot of people and so I think substantively that's really what got me interested in government itself.

And then in terms of actually making the transition to studying government and specifically doing that through political science, I attended the University of Michigan for undergrad and in that political science program, I really learned and discovered kind of the power of data and evidence to answer questions, to explore questions and answer questions in a really defensible and convincing way and so I think you know the combination of those two experiences are really what motivated me to pursue this kind of career.

I think the most important issue we're facing today is writing. Every child, every student, with a high quality education regardless of zip code they grew up in or the parent's education level or their parent's income level or their race or any of those

factors and this is, I think, a pressing issue that we all, you know, as a society really kind of collectively need to be responsible for and so, you know, obviously I'm at the brown center, this is what my work focuses on, but kind of more on a personal level how I, you know, kind of what this means to me. I was privileged enough to attend public schools K through 12 that were really high quality, you know, my family, my sister and I never had to wonder about which school to go to, you know, it's kind of a given that we could just go to our local school and that would prepare us, you know, to succeed and that's not true for a lot of communities and for a lot of students and that's something I saw firsthand.

So I was a teacher through Teach for America in Miami, Florida, so I taught middle school for two years and that was a really formative experience for me both personally and professionally, you know, just kind of seeing, you know, that contrast especially between the really excellent public schools I went to and then public schools that a lot of students attend that you know unfortunately don't serve them as well, that they deserve. What I'm most interested in right now is the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act, so this is the federal education law that replaced No Child Left Behind, so there's you know been a lot of policy change kind of as a result of that transition.

In particular, what I'm really interested in is the public notice and comment period that comes along with rulemaking after a law is written, so I think that rulemaking in the regulatory process is something that's incredibly important in terms of actually how policies get written and implemented after a law is passed and I think we don't know enough about that part of the process so for me what I'm looking at right now is,

particularly during the public comment period, what interest groups, what members of Congress, what members of the public are participating in this regulatory process and are giving their feedback on these proposed rules that the department of education is issuing and then you know on the other side of that, who is the Department of Education listening to so, what, you know, who's getting influenced, who's views are being expressed in the policies that we're actually seeing come out of this rulemaking process.

DEWS: And now back to Bobby McKenzie and Leon Wieseltier.

MCKENZIE: The situation in Syria is that, the refugee crisis is a direct result because of the situation in Syria.

WIESELTIER: Absolutely

MCKENZIE: Looking forward to the next administration, what do you hope to see?

WIESELTIER: I hope that Hillary Clinton, who I expect will be president, will act on her interventionist inclination. I know she's not allowed to say that she might, certainly not in the democratic party right now, but I'm hoping that being someone who is not only not afraid of the use of American power but has seen American power used for good in her lifetime and believes in the possibility of its being used for good, I hope that a safe haven is created, I hope that a Syrian rebel force is armed, I hope that we complicate Putin's calculations significantly, I hope that we get back into the arena and as I said, I understand the view that there is no military solution to the Syrian war, that is almost certainly the case, but there won't be any political solution until there are

significant changes on the battlefield and there won't be any significant changes on the battlefield until the United States decides to actually substantively help somebody.

You know, people forget that when one argues for the use of military force, and again I guess we have to say here that I'm not talking about and nobody in their right mind who shares my views is talking about dispatching a hundred twenty thousand troops to Syria and repeating what happened in Iraq; that is simply not anywhere in the discussion. We are talking about small numbers, small numbers, and anyway you know we already have 4,500 troops on the ground in Iraq, I mean, the idea that you know there are no boots on the ground and Obama ended all the wars and the yippee kai yay, that's not an accurate analysis of even what's happening now. I mean, the truth is whatever we're doing now, he specializes in, when he acts he specializes in inconsequential action for various reasons but I'm hoping that Clinton understands that it's not too late and that people in Syria in the region in Europe are waiting for the United States. They're waiting for America the way they've been waiting for Godot and they're waiting for us, they want our assistance; they need it.

And, you know, this goes back in my awareness of the Obama administration failings in this regard, this goes back to June 2009 during the democratic rebellion in Iran when these kids on the street were shouting Obama's name and he was in the White House reminding himself about, of Mosaddegh, I mean these kids didn't even know who Mossadegh was, they're 20, they were shouting his name they, people, they need our help, they want our help, and for reasons that actually begin to baffle me, they still think that we're the only country in the world that might help them.

MCKENZIE: What would your response be to those critics who say we were engaged in Libya and look at where we are today.

WIESELTIER: I would say that that would, that the whole discussion of Libya is seriously flawed because we were never engaged in Libya. The Libyan intervention was not an intervention; we were a gas station in the sky for NATO planes and once Qaddafi was dead, the objective of our mission became to end our mission. We couldn't wait to stop flying our planes there. We did not engage in Libya as such, we did not stay to help the next government do what had to be done to dissolve or organize the militias; we cut and ran. So as far as I'm concerned, the Libyan intervention was only technically an intervention and in my view, that's why Chris Stevens and the others died because we weren't there. That's the larger framework, not Hillary Clinton and Benghazi and all this crap that the republicans are generating. The fact is that we abandoned Libya and, you know, because, you know, as Obama one said, it's time for nation building at home but we're the United States of America and we have to build nations that are us and nations that aren't us. We have many, many duties.

MCKENZIE: Thinking of the various crises across the Middle East, it has led to one of the largest flows of refugees and forced migrants to Europe. This in turn has led to a very healthy and at times unhealthy discussion about not only refugees, about Muslim communities, and of course this has only been captured and magnified in very dangerous ways because of the string of horrific terrorist attacks. What are your thoughts about the discourse across Europe right now with regard to Muslims?

WIESELTIER: I'd say that, I'd say a number of things. First, the influx, the new Muslim populations in Europe have provided a pretext for the resurgence of European

fascism and there's no doubt about that. In Hungary, it's already in power. Poland, you know, there are Eastern European countries that have said in so many words that they will not admit refugees who aren't Christians. In France, Le Pen is flourishing is battenning from this I think that, but what, but the larger, the deeper analysis for me is that these influxes of Muslims, these new populations have actually reactivated Europe's old demons and what I mean by that is that you we like to speak of the West but in certain matters there's the European West and the American West.

The European West, the countries of Europe have no natural understanding of multi-ethnicity, none. Multi-ethnicity is essentially problematic for them, socially, politically, and philosophically. And this has to do with Europe's ancient moral failing on, about, on the question of otherness. Otherness has always been the Achilles heel of Europe's integrity, always. The examples are many and I think that we are now watching Europe once again grapple with its oldest demons and we'll see how the internal struggle comes out.

MCKENZIE: Do you think there's a chance that this crisis could force them to look inward and it could force them to move forward in ways that they haven't in the past?

WIESELTIER: I think there are only two possible outcomes. Either Europe finally breaks through to a natural understanding of multi-ethnicity, of its legitimacy, and of its blessings, or we see a resurgence of fascism. I think those are the only two outcomes. The United States by contrast, we had, we have racism here, we had, we have nativism here, but we are a country of immigrants and there is something natural about multi-ethnic social experience in this country, even though there are still uglinesses and



tensions that it creates. You know, the old canard, for example, against the Jews in Europe; the great modern slogan of modern anti-Semitism is that the Jews are a state within a state that they won't assimilate.

In the United States that is an incoherent charge to level at any group because, with the exception, of the Native Americans who are another thing we have on our conscience, everybody's a state within a state here. I mean we are a state of states if you will. We are a society of societies or a culture of cultures and for that reason, because we are an immigrant society and because we have prized the energy and the vitality that immigration brings to us, we have as I say a natural understanding of multi-ethnicity. We had it even before the doctrines and dogmas of multiculturalism came along.

Whereas in Europe, they can't get it right. They still don't under- they still can't get it right. And maybe the new social and demographic realities will force more and more Europeans into such a pluralistic Mentality., a genuinely pluralistic mentality in which there isn't a native and foreigner, in which there are only Germans or Frenchmen or Italians, in which citizenship and social and enfranchisement, civil enfranchisement will not require the erasure of one's particular traditions but in fact will celebrate the diversity of the particular traditions that comprise the social fabric. Maybe that will happen. Europe is grappling with these ideas right now underneath the force of necessity and as I say, either Europe will increasingly breakthrough to an acceptance of multi-ethnicity and its planned assurance or Europe will turn to its ugly past and revive its worst impulses. You know, I don't know, I don't know. On the question of otherness, I am never optimistic about Europe, ever.

MCKENZIE: And you don't think the current crisis may-

WIESELTIER: I don't know

MCKENZIE: Force-

WIESELTIER: I don't know. Merkel was very heroic in what she did; genuinely admirable. With one stroke, when she accepted all those refugees as far as I'm concerned, she became the moral leader of the West

MCKENZIE: Taking in 1.1 million refugees.

WIESELTIER: 1.1 million refugees, knowing full well, knowing full well, the nature of the society in the country into which she was taking them. It was an act of genuine decency and genuine courage. One of the most exhilarating acts that a politician has done anywhere in my lifetime. I have no question about that and of course now she's facing the blowback and I hope, well we know she has a spine of steel, I hope it serves her in good stead.

MCKENZIE: Leon, would you like to offer any closing remarks before we close out here?

WIESELTIER: I think it's important especially for liberals and democrats but also for Republicans, because the foreign policy consensus has just broken down and shattered in a million ways in recent years. I think it's important for all of us to recognize that Obama has set back the cause of human rights and democratization in the world and has demoted human rights and democratization as priorities in American foreign policy and has practiced by and large a cold-hearted realist foreign policy in the manner of Kissinger or Scowcroft, and I hope people recognize that this is not consistent not only with, not consistent with our values but also with our interests, and therefore I hope

that the change of administrations would be an occasion for a restatement or a rethinking of the first principles of liberal internationalism.

I think that many of Obama's assumptions about the obsolescence of some of the premises of our foreign policy since the Second World War and through the Cold War, I think those assumptions of his are false and that they've had bad effects for us and for other people and I think that, I hope that the new administration would be the occasion for restating a certain classical liberal internationalist idea about America's role in the world. it's an idea that needs restating because you know it's 2016 and there are a lot of young people who don't really know what I'm talking about and who think that all they need to know about American foreign policy is what George Bush did in Iraq in 2003, the way an earlier generation of young people, which is my generation, for awhile thought that all you needed to know about American foreign policy was what Johnson and Nixon did in Vietnam and that would be the primary model and the paradigm and all foreign policy conclusions would flow from that so I hope that, I hope there will be a rethinking and I really do because we are losing ground and when we lose ground, people suffer all around the world, they suffer. So for both strategic and moral reasons, we need to freshen, we need to freshen our sense of purpose up.

MCKENZIE: With that Leon, I'd like to thank you very much for your insights and this very bracing conversation.

WIESELTIER: It's a pleasure Bobby; thank you. DEWS: Visit our website to get more insight about the Syrian refugee crisis including a fascinating event held here on February 19<sup>th</sup> in which four Syrian refugees share their stories. Our final part of this episode is Bill Finan's interview with Don Kettl, author of the new Brookings Institution

press title, “Escaping Jurassic Government: How to Recover America's Lost Commitment to Competence,” in it Kettl shows how we can strengthen governmental effectiveness and shutdown gridlock. Don Kettl also happens to be my first boss at Brookings starting 20 years ago on the day of this episode's release, Over to you Bill.

FINAN: Thanks Fred and welcome Don; good to see you again.

KETTTL: It's great to be here with you.

FINAN: Jurassic government, what is that?

KETTTL: You know, it's a notion that, the problem once upon a time with the dinosaurs is that they failed to adapt to the changing environment and because of that they went extinct and my worry is that American government may be going down the same road; it faces enormous challenges and it has the wits about it maybe to be able to adapt but if it doesn't, the problems that we see of declining trust and rising problems of performance are likely only to continue so that's my big worry in writing this book.

FINAN: You mentioned the old Reagan joke near the beginning of the book that the most feared words in the English language are “I am from the government and I'm here to help,” but from your book it is in times of need that we most often turn to the government-why this attitude? why this paradoxical attitude?

KETTTL: Now, it's in some ways it's eternal and almost goes back to the dinosaurs because people have never liked government, they've never liked authority, they've never liked people telling them what to do, and they certainly don't like paying taxes, but on the other hand, when big problems develop they turn to the government. First, it's always a question about why wasn't the government there to try to prevent it, why can't the government solve these problems for us, and so the big challenge is trying to figure

out how we deal with the fact that we really don't much like government but we sure like and appreciate and even demand government to solve our problems for us.

FINAN: You have a lot of examples in the book and one of them that struck me was the Texas wildfires that occurred in 2011 that seemed to illustrate this paradox nicely, both at the state and federal level.

KETTLE: It's a fascinating case because here's a situation where this is from a part of Texas where the anti-government movement had been about as strong and as lively and vibrant and loud as it was anywhere in the country and had a member of Congress as well as citizens, are saying, "just get government out of our hair," but then some wildfires started and then the problem was, "well why isn't the federal government here to try to put the fires out?" There are tankers out there that are available, of course they were out putting out other wildfires in California but the Texas congressman demanded to know why it was that they weren't there in Texas. So finally, as a way to try to solve the problem, the Forest Service redeployed the tankers and about ninety-eight percent of all the land that they spent time trying to extinguish turned out to be state land, which wasn't the federal government's responsibility to begin with. So it's an important lesson here; everybody wants small government but when problems come, boy they sure expect government to come and try to take care of the problem even if it's not the level of government that's responsible for it to begin with. We have this broad sense of government without being very finely defined about who is really responsible for what.

FINAN: There's also an element of private contractors in there but I want to come back to those in a moment. Keeping with this issue of risk, in your book you have this

sentence: “the management of risk has become one of the most important foundations for the expansion of government since the eighteen-hundreds,” can you explain what you mean by that?

KETTL: There’s this really interesting puzzle about risk, what is it that we actually expect the government will do for us? What kind of problems is it responsible for solving for us? And what's happened is that bit-by-bit, year after year, we expect more and more things from government because, in part, because the world's more interconnected, in part because when problems happen we see it on news 24/7 but we really expect government's going to step in and solve problems because we see more risk in more places all around us and when that happens, our expectations for government's response have grown so that part of what it is that is responsible for the rise of government and for the rising challenges of government’s performance is a rising sense of risk. The things that are out there that could hurt us, that could scare us, that we wanted to have government try to solve. It goes everything from the financial crisis and the stability of our banks to just our ability to be able to cross the street safely and the more we see risk the more we expect government to step in and try to manage it for us on our behalf, of course without making government any bigger in the process we don't want government in our nose, in our face, taking its money, our money out of our pockets but that rising sense of risk is responsible in many ways for government’s rising role in our lives.

FINAN: You mentioned some government programs that are large and that we need and that, and as you put in the book too, that simply must work, that we have to have. Can you list some of the others you mentioned, one just a moment ago but that

you in the book, mentioned air traffic control, veterans care, but there are others beyond that.

KETTL: Sure. If you just think first about how much whenever we get on an airplane, we count on government working, most of its unseen but we have inspectors who take a look and make sure that the plane itself is safe, we have air traffic controllers, some of whom work in buildings without windows who make sure that the plane, as it takes off, ends up taking us to where we need to go and gets us back on the ground safely, we expect good care for veterans who have served our country and then turn around and make sure that they get the kind of care that they need, we expect good weather forecast to make sure that if storms threaten that we know what to do and how to plan and how to prevent ourselves, we expect the government to step in if disaster should strike with AFEMA that is strong and effective and vibrant, not too big, not too powerful, but there when we need it. We have examples everywhere where somebody, we take government for granted except when we need it and when we need it, we sure expect it to be there.

FINAN: Why can't private business, why can't private entities take over those jobs that you just mentioned, those risk management jobs?

KETTL: And in a lot of cases, in fact, the private sector is a huge and growing part of what it is that government actually does. One of my single favorite statistics about the entire federal government is that Medicare and Medicaid and related programs account for twenty-five percent; one out of every four federal dollars, but in terms of the number of employees working for the federal government who managed those programs it's 0.2% so 0.2% of all federal employees responsible for managing

twenty-five percent of all federal spending and how could that possibly happen? And the answer is that we rely on for-profit and nonprofit hospitals and healthcare clinics and doctors and other health care providers to actually provide the healthcare that Medicare and Medicaid pays for. The Department of Energy is ninety percent done through contractors, department of all of our space programs, NASA, ninety percent through contractors. It's hard to go anywhere in government without bumping into contractors taking on a large and growing role.

The problem is that, of course, we need to have somebody at home to be able to manage these programs well to make sure that we get our money's worth. It's one of these things that we want to learn the lessons from the private sector; one of the things that the private sector teaches us is that contractors don't manage themselves and there, at some point, has to be somebody at home whose job it is to make sure that those things that government must do, that only government can do, are done by government officials themselves, everything from managing security clearances on the one hand to exercising police powers on the other. There really is a core of government that only government can do.

FINAN: And the size of government, in terms of the number of people, hasn't really increased is a point that you make in the book, over what since 1970?

KETTLE: Yeah one of the things that's stunning is that the number of federal employees, full-time federal employees, is about the same now as it was back in the Kennedy administration. We've had this vast expansion of government's role, expansion government's power, expansion of government in our lives, but not an expansion in the number of federal government employees. The one minor little exception was we



insisted after 9/11 that the federal government take over screening at airports but you take that out and it turns out that the number of federal employees is actually a bit smaller than it was back in the sixties and the question is how could that possibly have happened? The answer is more reliance on contracts, more reliance on grants, more reliance on loan programs, more reliance on special tax breaks; we're at the point now, believe it or not, where we spend more money through the tax code, through special tax provisions and tax breaks than we do on all discretionary spending and so we just have an enormous amount of what it is that we do that happens through these indirect means that for the most part, we don't see, we don't count, and in some cases we don't manage very well but that's the core of what it is, the government's role in our lives really means today.

FINAN: There's a historical cast to this book to and you trace back this sense of government that you're trying to describe, that you are describing in the book, as having its roots in the progressive movement and first can remind us what the progressive movement was and why are those roots important and why do we need to come, to go back to those roots and work with them again today?

KETTLE: That's a great question and the first point in making it is that we have this assumption that progressive means large, big government, democratic power and that's not at all what it was, the progressive movement was back in the eighteen eighties. It was an effort to try to make government strong enough to try to balance the power of the private sector. There's a sense that oil barons, that railroad barons, that people who are running stockyards and other kinds of big corporate interests or simply taking advantage of people and the citizens were suffering as a result and that government

needed to be strong enough to be able to, not so much get in the way of the private sector, but to make sure that the public interest was defined and protected and so we had-

FINAN: And, I'm sorry, we're thinking this is around the late 1800s. 1880s, late 1890s?

KETTL: Late 1880s, late 1890s there was a sense that what we really needed was a government agency for example to make sure that the food that we got from stockyards was safe, that the big corporate monopolies did not run roughshod over private markets from the rest of us, that when we needed to have money to be able to borrow from banks that it was there that was safe and then it expanded over time in environmental protection and protection of the workforce but what's remarkable about this progressive movement is that there are both Republican and Democratic fingerprints all over it, that there are as many Republican initiatives as there are democratic ones. There was the expansion of the Federal Reserve and the creation of the Internal Revenue Service, the creation of the Food and Drug Administration, Interstate Commerce Commission. You look back over history and with the creation of these programs to try to protect citizens and balance corporate power, there are as many Republican initiatives as Democratic ones and on top of that, while we used to fight like cats and dogs about what government ought to do, there was at least a shared commitment that once a program was created, government had an obligation to administer it competently, that is the idea of creating a program and then just trying to kill it after the fact by starving government's ability to administer it, well with something that during this bipartisan progressive period, simply wasn't ever the case but what's

really happened since of course is that both Democrats and Republicans have lost their way and government's performance has suffered as a result.

FINAN: One of the points you also make in the book is the need to return to confidence and government; can you talk about that a bit?

KETTL: If you look at this, one of the saddest things that's happened in the last generation, generation and a half, has been the declining trust of Americans and the government's ability to be able to do what it is that's right and to be able to make government work well and both parties in fact have their fingerprints all over that. Democrats have tended to overreach and to enact big policy ideas without thinking about how to try to carry it through and Republicans have sometimes grudgingly gone along with the big policy ideas but when they don't like them they've tried to kill them after the fact through poor administration so we ended up, through different routes, getting to the same place; Democrats over-reaching and not managing programs well, Republicans even though they talked about the need to manage government often not paying attention to how to do that effectively so we've ended up in a situation where both parties have been complicit in a problem of declining competence in government and it's a serious problem. We see all the time programs that just don't work well, don't work as well as they should, as well as we expect them to work, we don't trust government as much as we used to make sure the government in fact operates as it should and as a result of that, this question of declining trust and declining competence have gone hand-in-hand and have set the stage for a lot of the really nasty politics that we've seen and that's, in the end, just not good for anybody.

FINAN: One of the areas, in terms of bringing confidence back, is people, you mentioned there's a, there needs to be real focus on people and skills, can you- what do you mean by that?

KETTL: Well, the interesting thing about this is that we used to think about and still think about government largely in terms of its size, how many government agencies do we have, how much money do we spend. We tend to think about it as the number programs that are created but in terms of really making government work well the crucial piece, increasingly, is the skill the people inside government to do government's work. There's almost nothing that government does that any one government agency can control, most of what government does is increasingly interwoven between the public sector, the private sector, the nonprofit sector, and maybe even the global world out there as well, and so if we're going to try in the information age to find a way to manage government effectively, we need smart people with the right skills in the right places at the right times to be able to leverage what it is that government does, it's not a matter of managing contracts but about managing these complex partnerships that are increasingly responsible for making sure that government can do what it is that we expect it to do and the only way to do that is to have smart people to be able to do it and that's the real tragedy of the war against bureaucrats that increasing what we've seen coming, especially out of politicians campaigning for office.

FINAN: That brings me to a final question; we're on the eve of one of the most contested elections in American history and on either side is the idea that government doesn't work and should be torn down, rethought, and revolutionized in many ways. How do you- how do politicians bring the idea of government as you see it, as a big

government that works for the benefit of the people, how do you bring that to a voting populace that seems to be intent on something very negative?

KETTL: Well, it's easy for us all to believe that boy government just doesn't work and the only way to do it is just to blow it up, that what we need is somebody who can come in from outside Washington to shake it to its foundations but it's one of those cases where we looked at the problem and actually the problem, to a degree we don't recognize, is us. It's what it is that we expect and our willingness to try to invest in a government that's competent to be able to make things work and the big challenge that's facing us in this election in particular is that I think we need to double down on competence, that the next president whoever he or she may be, is going to face a Congress that is just not going to be very interested in trying to give quick wins and that's going to be true whether it's Trump or Clinton.

That means that the success of the next presidency is going to depend on the president's own ability to be able to leverage the executive branch and that in turn is going to require a return to competence and a focus on getting results because if that doesn't happen then the next president's likely to be the insider that the candidates in 2020 run against all over again and at some point we're going to have to learn the lesson which is that if we want government to work and we want what we want from government, we're gonna need a government that has the skills to do what it is that we need to get it done.

FINAN: Thanks Don. The book again is "Escaping Jurassic Government: How to Recover America's Lost Commitment to Competence."

KETTL: It's been a great pleasure having a chance to talk with you about it.

FINAN: Enjoyed it.

KETTLE: Thank you.

DEWS: You can get a copy of “Escaping Jurassic Government” on our website and that's all for this edition of the Brookings Cafeteria. My thanks to audio engineer and producer Mark Hoelscher and to producer Vanessa Sauter. Bill Finan does the book interviews, and design and web support comes from Jessica Pavone, Erica Abalahin, and Rebecca Viser. And thanks to David Nassar and Richard Fawal for their guidance and support. You can subscribe to the Brookings Cafeteria on iTunes and listen to it in all the usual places. Want to ask a scholar a question? Send an email to [BCP@brookings.edu](mailto:BCP@brookings.edu) and I'll get an answer for you. Until next time; I'm Fred Dews.