

Transcript of Masthead Conference Call with Jeffrey Goldberg

Matt: Jeff, I wanted to start just on gun control. Can we actually talk about gun control in this country anymore?

Jeff: Well we could talk all we want about gun control. Nothing ever happens, obviously. It's interesting that we're having this crazy Meta conversation about gun control. We're not talking about gun control, we're talking about when is it appropriate to bring up gun control as a subject. So we're having a conversation about a conversation.

But I think ... I mean, this is not an original observation, obviously, but it seems as if we still haven't worked through the question of when is it appropriate to bring up gun control.

Of course, if you're on the NRA side of the fence, you believe that it's never the appropriate time to bring up gun control. If you're on the gun control side, you believe it's always the right time. These two sides don't talk to each other at all. We're not going to have ...

Recently David Frum had a very interesting piece after Las Vegas, I think it was right after Las Vegas, in which he noted that usually what follows after a shooting is usually the loosening of gun laws, not the tightening of gun laws.

Matt: So, is the goal then as journalists just to get people to actually talk to each other about this?

Jeff: Well, the goal as journalists is to write about what's happening and try to interpret it for our audience. This is an interesting subject for us, because I do believe that The Atlantic is meant to be a big tent sort of place. There was this great moment, and I think core Atlantic readers will appreciate this, great moment after we ran some piece that veered right as we do often veer right or toward the Libertarian right, and someone went on Twitter and said, "Hard to believe that the liberal Atlantic wrote X." Adam Serwer, one of our editors, wrote, "The Atlantic is not a liberal magazine, and it's not a conservative magazine. It's a magazine."

So I'm trying to be big tent about things, on these issues, and we all know, I mean intelligent people when they're thinking rationally understand that there are issues that are hugely complicated, and there are cultural and political and emotional and historical, constitutional overlays to this question and that this is a particularly hard one from a journalistic perspective, because it seems like everything has already been spoken.

We know the challenges and the problems, and we understand the Second Amendment argument, and we understand the pro-gun control argument, and we understand all these arguments. It's just that people are refracting reality in radically different ways.

Matt: Look, let me ask you about the big tent and the challenge of being the big tent in this era. A lot of folks think about The Atlantic as a liberal magazine, as you said. Of course it has this abolitionist history, how do you deal with people who are upset with the magazine that they've read for so long because it doesn't mirror their views in this political moment. What do you say to those kinds of people?

Jeff: I say to those people what Adam said on Twitter. Look, there's a certain business incentive. Let me be cynical about this and I'm going to be cynical on behalf of other magazines. There's a business incentive to be the voice of a particular tribe, right? I don't want to go down that road.

On the other hand, and let me preempt the question by answering a question I'm sure that's on people's minds. We live in a very unusual age because we don't have a traditional republican, traditional conservative president right now. Usually this country toggles between the liberal and the conservative in the way that we understand these ideology sects.

Now we have a popular, I don't know what you call him. That's a separate conversation obviously. You have to look far and you have to look pretty hard at The Atlantic, in its magazine or its website or wherever to find something that one could call pro-Trump.

But this goes to another difficulty or nuance of being The Atlantic, which is when the founders created The Atlantic, they founded it with two contradictory impulses. One was to be a magazine that opposed slavery in all its forms, and you were never going to find a pro-slavery apology in The Atlantic. Then the founders also wanted to be a big tent, for a place to eliminate and explicate the American idea.

I think what they were saying was, there are certain things that are beyond the pale, like the nature of a tent is that it does have flaps. It can be a very big tent but there's still something that's outside the tent. I think we're in a weird period in American history right now in which the behavior of a particular president is so outside the norm that we are sometimes, I'm just speaking bluntly here, that we are sometimes interpreted as a liberal magazine simply because we run a lot of pieces that are critical of the extensively republican president.

But as you well know, we've run a lot of people, we publish a lot of people, David Frum, first and foremost, who are dyed-in-the-wool conservatives who have serious problems with the way that this presidency is run. I'm going far with answering your question but you get where I'm going.

Matt: Yeah. Jumping back to that civil war era founding of the magazine, are we nearing the tipping point at which The Atlantic has to go full bore in one political direction or another? I think a lot of people listening have the intuition that American politics are as divided as they were almost since that era. Is there a moment coming on the horizon where things are so polarized, that is no longer something that would even be conceivable for us?

Jeff: I think we've already chosen sides, and I don't want to be self-righteous here or sound full of ourselves because we fail at most of our missions in a fairly regular basis. But I think we've chosen sides. We're on the side of E pluribus unum. We're on the side of the constitution. We're on the side of dignity in office. We're opposed to corruption.

We're for the idea that there are central animating ideas to the American experiment and arguing within that framework is fine but if you're arguing for ideas, whether they're the more radical populist ideas that we see coming to the fore or radical communist ideas. We're not going there.

But I think we've already ... And most important, and this is the thing, in our self-conception we're a magazine of the enlightenment. What I mean by that is that we endorse and believe in the enlightenment principle that there is such a thing as observable empirical reality and that our job is to report on that reality and interpret it. Therefore, the whole fake news, post truth moment that we're allegedly in, we're the enemy of that.

There are too many good people on the republican side and too many bad people on the democrat side, or however you want to frame this, for us to simply say, "No, we're on team X or we're on team Y." We make ourselves smaller by doing that anyway, I think, and that's not what my understanding of The Atlantic reader is. They don't necessarily want that.

There are so many places in the American media landscape to go to find people who won't challenge your assumptions, who will just give you the red meat of satisfaction that you get in your very carefully curated Facebook feed. That's not interesting, I don't want to do that.

Matt: Yeah. Let's talk about some of those politics. You mentioned the republicans who are in the middle of ... Well, I want to ask if you think they're in the middle of fracturing or consolidating at the moment.

We've run a lot, for instance, about Jeff Flake, a senator from Arizona who is now stepping out from politics. You've got folks like Bob Corker who's also decided to leave congress now. Do we need to listen to those folks because they're leaving the party—or I guess they're not leaving the party they're leaving the institution of congress, but do we need to ... Does that mean they're irrelevant because they've been written out by the Trump phenomenon? How do you think about that process?

Jeff: I think about it from a pure journalistic standpoint mainly, which is that people who are outside their own norm, outside their own mainstream are more interesting than people who just follow the party line, right? They are interesting people who are worthy of commentary and coverage.

It's funny because everyone talks about a split in the Republican Party. It doesn't seem as though there's much of a split. What people do is they point to Bob Corker or Jeff Flake and a large handful of conservative thinkers. Trump told the truth when he

tweeted out last week or two weeks ago. He said, "I went to the Senate Republican Congress and they gave me a standing ovation." Bob Corker didn't, Jeff Flake didn't, but everybody else did."

I think the idea that there's a huge division in the Republican Party is not the right framework right now. The real framework is Trump has taken over the Republican Party. That's the interesting thing.

Matt: Is there still a mystery to Donald Trump? A lot was made about this unpredictability at the beginning of his presidency and after he was elected, he's overseas right now so we could look at this from a global perspective too. But do people get Trump now in a way that they didn't when he was elected?

Jeff: It's an interesting question. Speaking for myself for one moment here. Trump is just more Trump now than he was a year ago to me. There is nothing more to see than what you see in a kind of way. I think that's what interesting about him. The presidency did not change him, it's actually accentuated the qualities that we've come to see in him over the 20 or 30 years that he's been in public life.

I'm not sure that we know anything now that we didn't know then. I think I was hopeful like some people, I think I was probably hopeful that there would be the potential for growth in office but there doesn't seem to be a learning curve.

Matt: Does that apply the United States border as well? I think folks were concerned that Trump would lead us into nuclear war in the first six months of his presidency, right? That hasn't quite happened yet although tensions are high. Has he figured out how to operate in the whiter world?

Jeff: I don't want to be one of those people who says that he's obviously going to destroy the earth. But I think where we have a president who's not equipped to handle the moral and intellectual complexities of being the absolute nuclear monarch. Remember the president is a nuclear monarch. It's not a democracy when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons. He can just go blow up something if he wanted to.

I don't want to be one of these chicken littles, but I'm nervous about his capacities to handle a complicated situation. When I was reporting on President Obama, I actually spoke to President Obama about this, the crazy Nixon approach to foreign policy, natural security in which, and this is in reference to Kissinger going around to Russians, and Chinese and saying, "Look, I understand what you're talking about but my boss is crazy. So you better just bend in my direction." It was useful but it's one thing to play that game, it's another thing to be that game.

If I was a foreign leader, I would spend most of my time trying to discern patterns of behavior to either protect myself if I'm an ally and not get into a conflict with him because he's irrational. On the other hand, and I could talk for an hour about this because this happened to be my journalistic specialty so I apologize in advance for verbosity. On the other hand, the problem that Obama had was that he was understood

to be so rational and logical and that he would talk about what he wouldn't do rather than what he would do, that there is a perception not totally without merit that our American adversaries understood that he wouldn't do certain things and took advantage of that.

With Donald Trump it's not the opposite. It's not like saying, imagine John McCain in the same row. You could see McCain in a deliberate way being the opposite of Obama in his posture.

But with Trump it's a radical isotope. You have no idea which way he's going to go on anything. That in itself might keep people from too much adventuring. Of course, in the North Korea case you have a leader in North Korea who we don't understand as well. So having these two in a face off is not exactly predictable.

Matt: I've got a question from Seffie about whether the big fish like James Mattis or H. R. McMaster are actually doing a good job. Do you look to them as you're trying to understand this administration, see what they're doing, or is this really just all about Trump personally and his decision making?

Jeff: No. It's about them too. If it helps you go to sleep at night, tell yourself, "Don't worry, H. R. McMaster is a grown up or Nikki Haley is a grown up, Jim Mattis is a grown up. But like I said, I don't actually believe that we'll find ourselves in a war because of an errant tweet. That seems too improbable.

But on the other hand, we could have a serious conversation about whether a president rather unhinged and spontaneous Twitter style will lead us to catastrophe. That's a crazy conversation to have but there you go. Once he goes upstairs as they say, all bets are off.

On the other hand, I think whoever winds up writing the definitive history of the Trump presidency 10 years from now, I think we're going to find out that there were moments that Trump's own aids thought that they were losing control of the situation. I just hear that they spend most of their time figuring out ways to give him a very limited set of options in a particular problem so as not to let things go off the rails.

Matt: So where is this having the most consequence? Because you look at things like the Paris agreement. Arguably any republican president might have withdrawn the US from the Paris agreement. Plenty of republicans are upset at the Iran deal, for instance. Where, maybe North Korea aside, where do you see this having the most effect on what the country is actually doing?

Jeff: The effect of all this, day after day, week after week, month after month, is to diminish the US role in the world. These individual problems are symptoms of a larger problem, which is that we have a president who is departed from the post-World War II bipartisan consensus about the American role in the world.

Even in low moments, the end of Vietnam, for instance, there was always this understanding that the US was going to play the role of guarantor of international stability, global stability. Everything from the protection of the sea lanes to making sure that treaties weren't forced. We have our web of alliances, very complicated, and that web serves to play a stabilizing role in global affairs.

For the first time since we became a superpower we have a president who doesn't seem to be interested in this. The only point I would make... I would try to make large this point, which is that every day we do this thing where we have no idea what's going on and we're not behaving like a truly stable ally or a country that adheres to the treaties that it signed. China is not doing this. China has been accruing power and influence so maybe this is the moment. Empires don't last forever, it's a truism.

It never struck me particularly that we would see America in global decline in my lifetime but you have to be rational and logical about it and say, if it has to ... things that go up go down and maybe this is the moment when we're going down. We won't know for a while. We won't know if we snap back into a more traditional position with a more traditional president, whoever comes next. But the trend lines are interesting.

Matt: Let me plead skeptic on that a little bit. You spent a lot of time with President Obama, look at China for instance, right? You mentioned this might be their moment but it was going to be their moment anyway.

They've been getting rich and powerful for quite a long time regardless of what the US is doing. It's not as if Obama trying to really figured out and cooperating with us, how much of this stuff was just going to happen anyway?

Jeff: But he was trying to figure it out. He was trying to figure it out, right?

Matt: Yeah, and that means ...

Jeff: I'm not kidding myself. I don't think that the United States is going to be the unitary superpower in 20 or 30 years. China is China. Remember for seven of the last nine centuries, China was the dominant global power even if people in Europe didn't realize it, right?

China is returning to its status in a way. But that doesn't mean that the US necessarily should prematurely withdraw from the playing field. I'm not just talking about issues of commerce and sea lines, I'm talking about the advancement of what we think of in shorthand as the American idea. Individual liberties, freedom of the press, freedom of association.

When America goes into eclipse, then those ideas go into eclipse. China and the government of China, they're not into the things that we believe. I think we maybe have a pretty good sense of this actually by now. But Donald Trump doesn't seem to be interested in carrying that particular set of flags into the global argument space.

Matt: Right. How much of this erosion then is reversible or how much is it permanent because for instance, some American institutions like let's say The Atlantic are thriving at the moment, right? You may not see ...

Jeff: We could always thrive more.

Matt: Yeah, Masthead members help us thrive more.

Jeff: I love Masthead members.

Matt: We do.

Jeff: They're helping us thrive. No, it's wonderful. It's a wonderful project.

Matt: There is something here, right, that some institutions—journalists—are carrying the weight as the executive of the United States government who was seen as this beacon of freedom is no longer interested in doing it. Do we focus too much on the presidency when we think about the strength of the American idea?

Jeff: Yes and no. The president is both the head of government and the head of state. How a president behaves, how a president talks has extraordinary influence, especially if this were an eight-year presidency not a four-year presidency.

On the other hand, you're right. They have not found a way to jail journalists. This not Turkey, they have not purged the judiciary of independent minded judges. The Trump administration itself does adhere to court rulings obviously on the travel ban. The institutions are so far resilient.

I think a lot about that Boy Scout Jamboree speech Trump gave. You had thousands of teenage boys and they are the future—you could take teenage boys and lead them down a path that ends in the Lord of the Flies and you could take a bunch of teenage boys and lead them down a path that ends in appreciation for tolerance and pluralism and humility and dignity and ... You know what I'm saying.

So, the institutions are resilient because they are run by people who came up in them before the age of Trump. Let's say that this is the new norm, how many decades go by before the institutions disintegrate from within, because no one understands the principles that under guard these institutions.

Matt: Yeah. Let me ask a question from Hank here. It's really about the strength of these institutions. He wants to know when or if the Mueller investigation gets very close to the top. Do you think from what we've seen here so far in the first, whatever, 9, 10 months of this administration, that institutions like the rule of law are strong enough to survive a frontal attack on them?

Jeff: It's interesting. Obviously everybody has thought about what happens when the news tightens around this or if the news tightens around this administration. It would be seen

to be in character for Trump to, I'm not predicting this, I'm just saying that one could see this as possible, that he would fire Mueller, which he can do and issue blanket patents.

My question there is actually not what he would do but how the American people would respond. I have a good sense of how it would go. Approximately 55% to 60% of the American people would respond. But what I want to know and nobody has the answer to this obviously, but what I want to know is what does it take to convince a diehard Trump supporter not to be a diehard Trump supporter anymore? You would like to think that firing a special prosecutor would be that thing, but I don't know.

Matt: What do you watch as indicators of stuff like that about how heartened opinion is? What alarms you or what makes you more reassured as you watched Trump supporters' reactions?

Jeff: Very little makes me reassured. I know. I don't understand. I'm a person who takes religion seriously. I don't understand evangelical support for Trump. 80% roughly of evangelicals voted for him. I have my understandings and intuitions and I've read a lot about it so I have some sense of it but I don't really know the answer to why they are staying in that camp.

I mean, democracy is not equipped for social media. I think we understand that now and I want to see if there's an eventual allergic reaction to the gross manipulation of the truth by various parties.

Look, I just was talking about this with someone. If we lived in a normal time in which people behaved normally to various political stimuli, right? Donald Trump would have been out of the race when he mocked John McCain for getting captured and falling prisoner of war.

If you would have said to anyone five years ago, "Oh, there's going to be a republican candidate who's going to come out and mock a POW for getting captured." Everybody would have said, "Well, that's going to be the end of their candidacy the same day." But he actually became more popular after that.

So, since the rules don't apply anymore, it's very hard to imagine what gets people to move away from their adherence or loyalty for this particular president.

Matt: Yeah. You've brought up social media which has been a big conversation of ours from The Masthead. I'll ask a question here from Fergus, what do you think about Facebook's role in our politics today? Is it all negative or are there glimmers of hope among the degradation of political discourse?

Jeff: If you take the long view, right? We first develop a technology and our ability to make new technologies outstrips our ability to figure out how to use them wisely. So maybe we're in that difficult period where we're realizing ... Look, I go deeper than Facebook, if you will, which is to Google search, right?



Google search is based on popularity. Now I know whether something appears to be true. Maybe that was our downfall. The moment when we decided that search engines operate according to how many people are looking at a particular website. So the assumption on the part of the engineers was that more people will flock to things that are obviously true and within the bandwidth of reality than not. But we don't see that.

With any luck, Facebook and Google and Twitter and all the rest will, under pressure, obviously, figure out ways to keep out obviously false information from people's newsfeeds and its various streams and their searches. But we're on the back foot on that and obviously as we could tell from the Russian intervention, democracy, we're extremely susceptible to manipulation.

I'm just hoping that this moment ... I know some of the people who run these companies. I have to imagine that they're stepping out of their own immediate corporate interests. They understand this exactly the way that I'm articulating it, and that they want to change in a way that gives us a better political situation than we have.

The thing is, I'm a big defender of the "MSM," the Main Stream Media, not just because I'm in it. I know all the flaws and the arrogance and the whatever and the mistakes and everything. But we did serve, still serve, but we really served 20 years as a filter for truly bad ideas, right? That filtration process is necessary and the legacy media companies can't do that alone. They need the big platforms now to try to make that work.

Matt: We had another question about what other forms of journalism you're considering. Where is innovation being driven in journalism in response to this? We've launched The Masthead for instance. What else does an organization like The Atlantic need to do or to practice?

Jeff: Well I'm moving the entire Atlantic to Snapchat. I'm moving the entire operation to Snapchat, I'm sorry. Let me just tell the members of The Masthead thank you for your service.

Platforms are secondary issues. We have six platforms now. We have the magazine obviously, our big website, The Masthead, the podcast, the video, we have live events.

I'm less interested in the platforms than what we're putting on to the platforms. I want to double down and we're doing this with people from The Masthead, with their help I want to double down on investigative reporting. I want to double down on data journalism, I want to double down on accountability journalism.

Understanding that it's a martialist attitude, a martialist climate for a journalist to get it wrong. I want to double down on being sure that we're telling the truth to the best possible degree we can tell the truth. These things all take resources and time to build. But I think that ... Again, I ask this question often, how do you convince people who are in this post-truth mindset, how do you get them to come back to, let's say, what I think of as enlightenment values?

I keep doing what I'm doing and I do more of what I'm doing I'm doing and then with any luck they'll come back. I can't convince somebody that The Atlantic is correct in its interpretation of the activities of the Trump administration, right? But I can keep doing that better and more and harder and with any luck we'll come out to a better place.

I'm really mainly engaged in how we get stories and how we tell stories across all of these platforms. Then probably three, four, ten more platforms that I can't even imagine right now. But the ultimate thing, all we are at The Atlantic is the stories we tell. I'm just focused on the stories.

Matt: So then are you not focused on the Trump administration's criticism of journalists? How worrying is this general climate of distrust in main stream media interests?

Jeff: Yeah, I'm worried about it and I'll fight it and I'll argue it. But I'm not convincing a lot of people who are in that camp. I get it directly on Twitter. I see the arguments.

But there can be this almost kind of compulsively condescending attitude toward people who are different than us. The Atlantic has an educated readership, readership that's heavy on the coasts, obviously. I don't want to be condescending to people who vote for Trump. I want them to read our magazine. So I would like to, and we are thinking about ways in which we do stories, the journalism that matters to the actual lives of these folks.

I do think, like Jeff Flake said, I think the fever does break. Part of a way the fever might break is over time doing assiduous journalism about the problems that actually afflict real Americans who are predisposed to not be in the Jeff Flake camp or in the democratic camp, but people who align themselves with the Donald Trump camp.

Matt: Do we need to hear more directly from that camp? It's tough when you've got folks like Kellyanne Conway who can be characterized as misleading the press all the time being the main spokespeople for the Trump administration. But somebody like Eliot Cohen who writes for a lot of magazines, a friend of the Trump administration, voices that we are not hearing from t—would they do a better job of explaining the Trump point of view?

Jeff: One of the many things that I try to do in the course of the day is to look for that. The problem comes, and I'd love to have more people who are pro-Trump or pro-Trump voters, let's put it that way, write on our site and our magazine. The problem is, and I don't mean to sound condescending right now, but we do have fact checking and we have to have things that are true.

You can't just go and make the argument that Donald Trump is going to enact policies at the end of the week that hire 100,000 coal-miners. I don't know, whatever the issue is. So, we can't just run propaganda from any part or any political faction. But yeah, I'm eager to have the real lives and real views of people who voted for Trump and support Trump engage in our enterprise.

Matt: I want to ask you about something you wrote in the magazine this month about a campaign that president Lincoln had back 160 years ago. He was trying to negotiate with the south and they didn't want to talk to him.

So he decided to try to run something in the magazine in The Atlantic, trying to get this published in The Atlantic. You wrote that he was taking advantage of the way that the magazine was viewed. Could I say that you would have vetoed this publication?

Jeff: What do politicians always say? I don't deal in theoreticals, I don't deal in the hypotheticals here. I brought that up. That's an interesting episode. I hope people read that letter, maybe we could send it to The Masthead membership, the editor's note that I wrote. The point is that Lincoln wanted to trade on the reputation of the fairness of The Atlantic and The Atlantic allowed him to do that.

I just found that humorous and I used that as a ... I'm very pleased obviously that Abraham Lincoln cared about The Atlantic enough to think that it was a good venue for carrying of his opinions, right? But, we always have to be on guard ... I think this is a general rule of journalism, but you always have to be on guard for people trying to manipulate the system and take advantage of what people think of as our fairness, or at least our attempts to be fair.

Matt: Got it. All right Jeff, we're a little over time here so I'll say thank you very much for joining us and let you go.

Jeff: Okay, thanks everyone. I appreciate it.

Matt: Okay everybody, thanks for sticking with us. We're going to come back next week when we'll have Caitlin Flanagan on, and hopefully we'll have better technology than the 1860s. Thanks everybody. Bye, bye.