

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:00:12):

You are listening to The Great Simplification with Nate Hagens, that's me. On this show we try to explore and simplify what's happening with energy, the economy, the environment, and our society. Together with scientists, experts, and leaders, this show is about understanding the bird's eye view of how everything fits together, where we go from here, and what we can do about it as a society and as individuals.

(00:00:42):

Today's guest is Richard Gephardt, a retired politician who was a member of US Congress for 27 years. He was House of Representative Majority and Minority leader from 1989 to 2003. He also ran for President of the United States twice, in 1988 and 2004. Dick has had a storied career in public service and afterwards in lobbying. Today he's working on issues of democracy, social media, polarization, and climate change. We work together on a project called advance policy, which is trying to look two or three steps ahead at the macro policy interventions that our society and leadership will need in the coming decade.

(00:01:24):

In this podcast we had a heartfelt discussion highlighting the differences between the political system 30 years ago versus today, and the critical importance of civic engagement and leadership. I hope you enjoy and are inspired by the conversation.

(00:01:52):

Leader Gephardt, good to see you.

Dick Gephardt (00:01:55):

Good to be with you, Nate.

Nate Hagens (00:01:55):

So you are 80 years young, you have a long successful career in public service, in politics. You ran for president twice, you were House Majority Leader, House Minority Leader, for almost 15 years. Why aren't you golfing and playing with your grandchildren? I've known you for a few years and you are working 50 or 60 hours on the phone. Why aren't you retired and doing those things?

Dick Gephardt (00:02:27):

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Well, I guess work is my hobby. I'm interested in a lot of different things, and with my experience background, I see a lot of things that are really threatening: both human survival and survival of our democracy, and that's what really motivates me. I love this country. I grew up poor in St. Louis, Missouri, my parents didn't have much of anything. My dad lost his job early on, his back was injured and he couldn't be a truck driver anymore. So my mother went to work and I went to public schools in the city of St. Louis, and it never entered my head to go to college. Nobody had ever talked to me about any of that. I had never left St. Louis in my entire first 17 years of life.

(00:03:21):

And I had a high school teacher when I was a junior in high school who stopped me one day from a speech class and she said, "I think you could get a scholarship to go to Northwestern to their junior high school institute five weeks in the summer between your junior and senior year. Would you like to have me help you fill it out?" And I said, "Great." So she did, I got the scholarship. I get on the train, we used to travel by train, and I went up to Chicago, and went up on the L, and wound up on the Evanston campus. Walked out on that campus for five weeks of work and debate and theater, and all these things that I knew little about. And I met all these champion debaters, champion extemporaneous speakers, champion dramatists, poetry readers, what have you.

(00:04:13):

I thought I'd landed on Mars. To me, it was an out-of-body experience for five weeks, to interact with all these people and to learn about all these different things you could do with your life. So I was passionate from that in being involved in communication studies, and so I got a scholarship to go to Northwestern, and then I got a scholarship to go through Michigan Law School, and I got interested in politics. Jack Kennedy was president when I was in law school, and I really admired him and thought if somebody like that could give his life to public service, that would be a neat thing to do.

(00:04:53):

So when I came back from law school experience, I got a job in a law firm in St. Louis and I immediately signed up at the local Democratic organization and got named to be a precinct captain, a volunteer position. So that started me in politics. The committeeman, I said, "What is my job?" He said, "You got to go talk to everybody door to door and meet everybody in your precinct, figure out who's likely a Democrat,

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who's likely a Republican, who's likely an Independent, mark that after their name. And then you need to go stand at the polling place and hand out the sample ballot on election day, and if by 4:00 any of the Democrats haven't shown up, then you get in your car and you go out and get them and bring them in to vote."

(00:05:42):

So that got me into politics, so the rest is history. What I'd say is this is still today the land of opportunity, and there are very few places you can grow up in today in the world where you can really say that and believe that. And people today can still do whatever I did, or anything they want to do, because this is a magical country that is founded on government of, by, and for the people, and freedom for all of our citizens, and rule of law undergirding the entire operation. So I just will not stand by and see that go away for my kids and grandkids and future generations. So as long as I have any capability, I'm going to fight to hold onto this democracy, and I'm also going to fight to keep us from not surviving because we didn't deal with climate change, which is our biggest challenge going forward.

Nate Hagens (00:06:52):

Well, as I've told you often, I deeply appreciate and value your continued efforts on these issues. What's the biggest difference between DC now and DC in the '80s and '90s when you were working in Congress?

Dick Gephardt (00:07:09):

Well, there's obviously a lot of differences, as time marches on conditions change in the country and all of that's a factor. But to me, the biggest change, and the most consequential change, is the communications culture, the information culture that we have in the country today. Human behavior has been pretty consistent through centuries. I think we've evolved and gotten better, and we have better values, and certainly people in the United States value democracy and freedom and rule of law, the things I talked about. But there have always been people who are conspiracy theorists, there are people who are just racist and haters and angry people and upset people, and all that's been present.

(00:08:01):

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But in today's world they can all communicate and put their information out hundreds of times a day, and that communication is then distributed widely across not only America but the world. And my worry is the information platforms, the social media platforms, the media platforms that are out there today have a business plan, in my view, that compels them to distribute that sometimes angry information, hateful information, to people that will be affected by that by making them angry and anxious, so they keep their attention on the platform and they can sell them more ads that makes them more money. So in a way, where we wind up with the business plan of these major platforms, their business plan is probably inconsistent with having a healthy information culture and therefore having a healthy democracy. So that to me is the biggest change.

Nate Hagens (00:09:19):

It's like everyone has their own AM talk radio show, and the more extreme the message is, true or not, gets disseminated more and more. And that changes the population, but it also changes who we elect, because more extreme people on both sides then get elected. I don't know that that could have happened in your era, that we would've had those extreme people be elected.

Dick Gephardt (00:09:47):

Let me tell you a story, another anecdote. So I used to do town hall meetings all the time, and I did that because I was in a 50/50 district that was evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, so I really had to be in front of the people as much as I possibly could. I went door to door for 30 years. Just every time I went home I went door to door, because I wanted people to know me. I knew a lot of them would disagree with most of my votes, but if they knew me, I'd have a chance to getting their vote because they would know that I'm trying to do my best for them, even though they disagreed with me.

(00:10:26):

So I do these town hall meetings as well, and you know, get 200-300 people in a church basement, a school basement, and I just let them talk. I'd say, "It's open mic, you get up and say anything you want, you criticize me, criticize my votes, bring up issues you're worried about, whatever." And 98-99% of the people were great. Even if

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they got up and complained about things, that was fine, that's the purpose of the meeting. But there were always two or three people who were either just angry, mean people, or they were crazy.

(00:11:07):

One anecdote I so remember is a woman got up and said, "I just want you to know, Congressman, I want everybody here to know, the Martians have landed, and they're outside my house every night looking in my house, and they're trying to get in my house. And I went yesterday to Home Depot and I bought all the tin foil I could buy and I put it up over all my windows and doors, and I'm so far keeping them out. But all of you, including you, Congressman, need to go do the same thing in order to survive." And so I thanked her for her contribution to the meeting, but in those times, nobody outside that meeting heard her. She could get on talk radio, but nobody really listened to talk radio, it was a bunch of cranks on there, right? Now she can get on social media and post that message hundreds of times a day, and then the media companies, the social media companies, distribute that information straight to people that might be really amped up by that.

(00:12:16):

And so we're in a completely different world, and in the end, this results in dividing the American people. And you not only have the business plan of the media companies, you've got foreign countries who are not our friends, who want us to blow up, pushing this stuff out there day and night as well. So the people, in my view, are as divided today as they were in 1860 before the Civil War. We've had lots of divisions in the country, the Vietnam War, civil rights, you can go down the list, in the last hundred years. But we have never, in my view, been as divided as we are right now since 1860, when we wound up in the worst war ever.

Nate Hagens (00:13:08):

So this, as you know, I'm working on energy, climate, finance, end of growth, sorts of issues that are intermediate term. I've concluded, and you and I have talked about this a lot, we can't solve those issues unless we have a shared understanding of what the facts are, shared values, respect in journalism and media, and a discourse where you can meet with people, and you might disagree with them, but have a basis for discussion. If we can't have those discussions, we're lost. So what are you working on in

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that area that you can talk about, and what are you most afraid of and what are you most hopeful on, on that topic of social media and polarization given your efforts?

Dick Gephardt (00:13:58):

Well, this information thing is even more complicated than I've already described it because my sense is people over 45 don't engage in social media that much. Some of them do, obviously, but not many of them. But people under 45 years of age are pretty much stuck on social media and internet communications. The older people, you now have political forces that are capturing the traditional media, cable channels, radio, TV, and so they're adding to the disinformation culture that's out there for their own political reasons. So when you put on top of that what's happening with social media, and that's affecting lots of people under 45, and some people over 45, you've got a really toxic culture for communications and information.

(00:15:00):

So there are two things that we're really trying to work on. One is to, it's a hard thing to discipline or to change these social media platforms because we believe in freedom of speech and we don't want to give that up. And as our friend, Tristan Harris, who used to work at Facebook or Google, has so well said, "We have to have freedom of speech, but we don't have to have freedom of reach." And so some way or the other, I think the government has to either get these platforms to change their algorithms, which are designed to make them more money, but not to support the information culture being healthy, or require them to do that through regulation. That's difficult to do because you don't want to lose freedom of speech, and nobody really would advocate that, I wouldn't, but we have to change what's happening within those platforms, and one way or the other it's got to be accomplished.

(00:16:06):

On the traditional media sources, it's a tougher even set of answers. If I could stop the politicization of these stations, I'd do it instantly. I'm not sure that's very easy to do. We used to have a fairness doctrine that made TV stations and radio stations put the other side on when they advocated a certain position, that was taken away in the early '90s by the Republicans. We've got to help both the social media platforms and the traditional platforms do a better job of delivering shared facts, of being what the Fourth Estate used to be, which is a independent source of information about

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government, and not being part of the government, and not distributing divisive information as part of their business plans.

Nate Hagens (00:17:04):

So I know there's really polarized views on climate change between the left and the right, on energy, on inequality, things like that. Is there a bipartisan, nonpartisan recognition of the social media information ecosystem issue, or is that starting to become more recognized on both sides of the aisle?

Dick Gephardt (00:17:28):

We're not there yet. I'm hopeful that we can get there, and I'm part of a group that's really trying to figure out how to do that. We think that maybe the way to start to get to a bipartisan shared facts about this is, because of the problem that's been created for young girls by some of the platforms like Instagram, and you can fairly easily get bipartisan agreement that that's a problem that needs to be addressed. Whether we can go beyond that, even if we can get to that, to the rest of the phenomena that's going on, I don't know.

(00:18:10):

So far Republicans just don't want to be shut out, of their communicators being shut off the platforms, like Donald Trump has been off Facebook. That's their complaint. Democrats really feel this is dividing us and that we've got to do something about it. So let's see if we can get to some bipartisan agreement, because without it, we're never going to do anything about this. Nothing's going to happen and it's just going to continue to get worse. With AI our understanding is that this whole divisive mechanism will become even more effective than it already is, and we could be in so much trouble that we never get back to where we need to be.

Nate Hagens (00:18:54):

I think I've said this to you before, but the default will eventually be that there'll be a echo chamber on the left, and a larger echo chamber on the right, and a big chunk of people in the middle that just don't read or believe in anything on the news anymore. In that scenario, that's end of democracy sort of scenario. I used to say that, and I just wonder if we're already there on those things. So this is a really critical problem.

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Dick Gephardt (00:19:25):

Well, it's really worrisome. I mean, just look at three big issues right now and you see the effect of all this. So let's take COVID, you cannot get a shared agreement on even what COVID is, or certainly what to do about it. The same thing with climate change, you can't get an agreement among people about the fact that there's a problem, or certainly what to do about it. And the same with having elections. I mean, right now you're at a point where 66% of Republicans in the country by polling thinks the last election was won by Donald Trump. So if you can't have any shared facts on these big, big challenges to the country, issues, you're done, it doesn't work. And then the people in the middle that haven't taken a side will just say, "Government doesn't work, it's dysfunctional, so let's get rid of democracy and let one person try to figure this out." So the Chinese model may not be what anybody wants, but at least they can act, they can move, they can solve things, and that's my great worry.

Nate Hagens (00:20:45):

They have done a lot of things on social media, they do a speed bump after every TikTok video, there's a 10-second delay that before you go to the next one. For young people there are limits on 45 minutes Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night on the internet. I don't see that ever happening in this country, but I bet a lot of parents would be in favor of such a thing happening.

Dick Gephardt (00:21:08):

Yeah, and the flip side of that is that not only can they do that for what individuals can do regarding the social media stuff, but they can also completely censor all of the other information to the leadership's benefit. The way you got to think about this is dictators always want to control the information so they can stay in their vaunted position of power, it's all about political power. Hitler had Goebbels, and they had radio, and they had rallies, that's all they had. They didn't have social media, but just imagine what they could have done with that, and censoring all the information on the internet in the country, and that's what Germany and Russia can do today. So that's not really an answer for us, but it does work, and you could get greater unanimity on some issues, I guess, if you just pump one set of information at people.

Nate Hagens (00:22:14):

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So what do you think the relationship is between shared information, or social media, and what it's doing to the lack of shared values in our country? Do the shared values disappear without all this social media? How can we care about the same things again? Because we all ultimately care about healthy ecosystems and clean water and good, safe schools for our children. I mean, ultimately Americans deep down care about the same things, but is social media disrupting our shared values or is something else going on there?

Dick Gephardt (00:22:50):

No, if you can't have shared facts or information it's pretty hard to have shared values, because you live in two different alternate realities. And if you're living in two different realities, it's very hard to figure out how to address those realities together. So your shared values go out the window with no shared information, they're tied together.

(00:23:21):

I believe still today the vast majority of Americans believe the democracy is really important, they believe bipartisanship is the only way to solve problems. They want the problem solved, they know that they're not going to like every part of every solution, but they know that in a democracy everybody gets some kind of representation or say into the debate and they have a vote through their representative. You don't have that in a dictatorship, that's gone. One person makes the decisions and everybody goes along with it, or they create order by violence. That's the way dictatorships operate. So I think most Americans share those values and want those things to happen, and they don't understand really what's happened to us. So I think if we can communicate this to people and come up with reasonable solutions, we can get back to more shared information, and therefore shared values, because I think those values run deep in the American people still today.

Nate Hagens (00:24:39):

What were, back in the day, some of the routines that you had when you were a leader that reduced partisanship in Congress?

Dick Gephardt (00:24:49):

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Well, democracy is always really hard, it was really hard when I was there. Believe me, this is never easy. It's so much easier to have one person in the room rather than 535 people. Just imagine being on a committee of 535 people and everybody disagrees with everybody else on every thing. So when I became leader we had four people in the leadership and I immediately expanded it to 60, 6-0, and I purposely picked people from the far left in the Democratic party, to the right of center, and we had everything in between. From all over the country, different parts of the country, different kinds of backgrounds, different kinds of ethnic makeup.

(00:25:45):

And I put them in a room every night at 5:00 for two hours and all I said to them was, "I'm not going to say anything, I just want to listen to all of you interact, and we're going to go through the issues that we have to try to reach a consensus on. I know we don't have a consensus on any of it, but we got to listen to one another." I used to say to them, "Nobody knows everything, I wish I did, I don't. I know what I know, but I don't know what you know, and you don't know what I know, so we got to listen to one another and learn from one another. We have different backgrounds, different experiences, different people we represent, and we've got to figure out how we can come to some rough consensus, compromise on a subject, whether it's immigration or healthcare, or whatever."

(00:26:39):

I never saw it fail. We had some really bad meetings, I mean people would say, "Screw all of you, I'm tired of this, you're all crazy, I'm leaving," but they always came back, and they continued to listen, and we got an agreement on most of the big issues. So that was the Democratic Party, then we had to go reach out to the Republicans and do the same thing. So it's an arduous process. I never came home at night, I did this job 24/7. My kids used to say to me, "Where are, what are you doing?" And I said, "I'm sitting in rooms listening to people, because my job is how do I get a thread through 218 people?" That's my job, that's the majority in the house, to do anything.

(00:27:30):

So that's hard work, and it never was easy it, and now I think it's impossible because if you think about it, people complain to me about Congress and I say, "Yeah, it's a mess, they're not doing anything, they can't solve anything." But if you think about it, it's not their fault, it's the fact that the American people are divided, irrevocably. If the people

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are divided, Congress is a reflection of the people, that's what it is, so it will be irrevocably divided. So it all goes back to this information culture, the division among people, the worst since 1860. If we can't make inroads on that problem and begin to solve it, then those 5:00 discussions that I had won't work either. It worked then, but I don't know that it would work now.

Nate Hagens (00:28:30):

So you are writing a book, could you talk about the title, when it's going to be out, and some of the core concepts in the book?

Dick Gephardt (00:28:38):

Yes, the name of the book is 535 Not 1, and it's a series of stories of what I did, what I encountered, what I tried to do over 28 years in the House, 14 years as Leader. And just to give people a sense of how hard it is to make that huge committee operate and function, and why it is a superior, a vastly superior model to the authoritarian model, which would be letting one person make all the decisions.

(00:29:22):

One of the things I say in the book is I saw a lot of big, tough, divisive issues get decided. I mean, people were amped up on both sides to the heights. But yet when we finally could make a decision by even a slim majority, one vote in the House and Senate on some of these things, the people who were disappointed by that compromised decision in the country, ready to pick up a rifle or leave the country because they thought the process was fair. They were included, they debated it, they argued their position as strongly as they could, and they argued it throughout the country as strongly as they could. We had a vote, they lost, but it was fair. And so they were grudgingly willing to accept the result. That's the magic of democracy, and that's what we're on the cusp of losing if we let this democracy go

Nate Hagens (00:30:29):

Because left or right, whoever wins the elections, it's fine, but if we start to doubt that the elections are legitimate, like last year, then it's a very dangerous slope.

Dick Gephardt (00:30:40):

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Exactly. I mean, that's another example of why people have to believe in the fairness of the process. When I was in the house I used to say, "Process is everything." It's everything. Because if you don't trust the process by which you're making these decisions, whether you're deciding on candidates or on issues, then you're done, it doesn't work. People don't trust it, they don't believe in it, they aren't willing to put up with it. They aren't willing to grudgingly accept those decisions. And so that's what we're really in danger of losing. When President Trump keeps saying that he won and the election was unfair and it was stolen, and millions and millions of people believe that, we're in a bad place, this is bad, and we've got to somehow work our way back to a belief that things are being done in a process that is fair.

Nate Hagens (00:31:43):

I know you're working at high levels on that. Are there things that you would recommend to just normal, common, everyday citizens to help the disinformation, fractured information ecosystem?

Dick Gephardt (00:32:00):

Well, we all have to be better consumers of information, and I include myself in that category as well. I mean, when you hear things, or see things on the internet or on TV or radio or newspapers, the few that are left, you've really got to question the source, and where did they get this information? And have they verified this information? I hope that we can, at some point, get to a grading system of sources of information so that consumers who want to know what's more or less true and what's more or less not true, they can get some sense of what to look for and which sources of information to put trust in.

(00:32:49):

And then beyond that, I just always encourage people to be open to listening to one another in the community, in the school board, in the PTA, in the church group, or in any civic organization they're involved in, with their neighbors. Even if you violently disagree with somebody, listen to what they're saying, try to understand why they feel the way they do. And then maybe, if you do that enough and effectively, maybe they'll open up to your beliefs and your take on the facts, just to build more understanding. We've now just cut each other off, it's like, I don't want to exist with this person, I don't

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want to live in the same community, I don't want to be around them, I hate them. So violent disagreement can easily lead to hatred, human hatred, and when you're in that position, you're not open to listening to anything, you just want to get rid of them or get away from them or shoot them, and that's where we are.

Nate Hagens (00:34:01):

You once told me that, I don't know if this was something that happened recently or long ago, but when you start a meeting with a lot of people, before you get into the topic that everyone's convened to discuss you ask people, "What's something good that happened to you in the last year and what's something bad that happened to you?" Or something like that, and then you get people on the same page, right?

Dick Gephardt (00:34:24):

Yeah. One of the things I've been involved in the last 15, 16 years is helping companies and unions have a better relationship. The whole union movement grew up in a time when companies didn't want unions at all and they didn't want to hear from their employees, they just wanted to tell them what to do and then check to see that they did it. And in today's world, that isn't going to work anymore. If there's just an adversarial relationship between workers and employers, they're just not going to succeed. The enterprise is going to fail, because the only thing any company has is its employees, its people. And if they get 100% productive effort out of everybody, they're going to succeed, more times than not. And if they don't get that, they're not going to succeed.

(00:35:18):

So when we'd get into a tough fight between a union and a business, we'd get the union people together with the management people in a room at the company. But before we'd start talking about the issues I'd say to everybody, "Before we get to the issue we're here to talk about, maybe we just ought to open it up for everybody to tell about themselves, tell where they grew up, what their family's like, where they were educated," so on and so forth, "and then tell us the best thing that happened to you in the last year and the worst thing that happened to you in the last year." When I started this I thought that people are going to think this is dumb. They didn't, they

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liked it, and everybody talked. This went on, in some of the meetings it would go on for an hour or two.

(00:36:10):

And at the end of that, people who had worked together for years found out things about other people that they did not know. We had one union guy who said, "The worst thing that happened to me in the last year was my wife died six months ago." Nobody knew it, management or labor. People went up to him after the meeting and they were hugging him, because they did not know that he was living with that tragedy in his life. So communication is extremely important, and part of my worry is that virtual communication is not as good as in-person communication. It's great, I mean, it's a big multiplier of our productivity, I think, and so there's a lot of good in it, but we can't miss out on face-to-face communication and really interacting with people as people. Once you know somebody and you know their background and you know their problem, they have problems just like you do, it's a lot easier to then work through the problems than the disagreements you have to get to an agreement.

Nate Hagens (00:37:31):

Well, we are incredibly tribal people, and if you just meet someone and know nothing about them except their business and I'm union, or they don't believe in climate change and I really care about it, everything is through that lens. But if then you hear about their family or their high school, or they like the Green Bay Packers, you've formed another in-group on another topic, and I think that's the only way. So in your book, do you describe why your nickname was Lead Butt Gephardt anywhere?

Dick Gephardt (00:38:03):

Yeah, I guess all this goes back to my mother. So when I was a little kid, five years old, she'd get down her knees and look me in the eye and she'd say, "Dick, you're going to get back what you give out." That was her version of the Golden Rule. It's the most important lesson I ever learned. And she even made it very graphic for me because she knew I didn't quite understand what she was saying. So she'd say, "Before you say anything to anybody, think how you would like it said to you. Before you do anything to anybody, think how you would like it done to you."

(00:38:44):

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And later on when I was a teenager I think I said to her one time, "Well, I don't always get back what I give out." And she said, "Yeah, I know," she said, "That's undoubtedly true. But the vast majority of the time, you're going to get back what you give out." And that's where we've got to wind up if we're going to get along as human beings, understand each other, listen to one another, try to find solutions to the problems that we can agree on, and find those difficult compromises that allow us to move together, forward together. And it's hard, it's hard work, it takes time. It's being less ego involved, it's more selfless, less selfish, and that's a very important value that we've got to inculcate in our young people.

Nate Hagens (00:39:48):

Earlier today I got sucked in a rabbit hole on the internet, I was looking up the remaining living cast members of the show Gilligan's Island and I was looking online, and it had all these characters from the '70s and '80s on TV shows, and instead of saying what they'd done with their life, all it did was have a picture and their net worth. Betty White is worth a hundred million dollars, all these people. And it's like, how has our culture morphed to we've defined someone's net worth as a human being as their financial net worth?

(00:40:23):

And the reason I bring this up is you and I have worked together for a couple years, and working with you and our mutual colleagues on these problems is worth more than money to me, because we're working on something that, as you refer to as our Darwin moment, that is larger than ourselves, and there's a deep meaning in working with other pro-social, smart people who care on these issues. You have embodied a lifetime of public service, how do you view public service for the greater good? What advice would you give to young people? Can that happen again?

(00:41:05):

I'm hopeful that we will have some emergence in the future of people wanting to contribute to the greater good. I think I told you there's a guy named Scott Barry Kaufman, who I eventually would like to have on this broadcast, who wrote a book called Transcend, and he studied Abraham Maslow's hierarchy. But right before he died, Maslow actually retracted that self-actualization was the pinnacle of the

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pyramid, and it was in service to something greater than yourself was the actual high of human potential. What do you think about all that?

Dick Gephardt (00:41:46):

I totally believe that. To me the biggest thing in your life is to have a purpose that really motivates you, whatever it is. In my life it's been public service, it's been trying to solve problems, make the world better, make the country better. But there are various ways you can do that, you don't have to get in politics to do that, all of us can do that. And I'm encouraged by the young people that I've been meeting all over the country, I think they really get this, much more than my generation did, in fact. And they really are concerned about where we're headed, they're concerned about climate change, they're concerned about democracy, they're concerned about having a fair society and equality of opportunity, and all the things that Americans have always believed in, but they really feel we're under threat, that we could lose these things, and we've got to really think about this.

(00:42:53):

Let me take it to a different level. In this work I've done with union people and companies, I've been amazed that workers always want more money, all of us, everybody wants more money, I guess, unless you're a multi-billionaire, but maybe even they do too.

Nate Hagens (00:43:13):

Mm-hmm, they do.

Dick Gephardt (00:43:15):

But people, more than money, they want purpose, they want to feel that what they're doing in their work every day is meaningful and important, and they're part of a team that is delivering some kind of service or product that really helps people, that's really important to people, important to the community, important to the country, that's what they want to work for. And everybody, I think, and I've heard workers say this to me, more important than getting that raise is to be able to go home and tell my family what I'm doing and why it's important and why I like doing it. And that means that everybody, the janitor in the company, can have a purpose of helping that

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company do whatever it's doing, which is beneficial to other human beings and the community and the country.

(00:44:23):

If we get there, then money will take a different approach, or a different view on a lot of people. We have venerated wealth creation as the purpose of life, it's not. As long as you have enough to eat and a place to sleep and live with your family, what do you need all this stuff? It's just stuff, and you wind up having to throw it away or give it away, which is just, it's crazy. So we've got to encourage people, and I'm encouraged by young people, because I think they get this, much more than my generation. And I'm really hopeful that we can get back to that set of values, get off the importance of money and wealth and onto the importance of service to others in our life.

Nate Hagens (00:45:19):

As you know, I totally agree. I get paid in things other than dollars, I get paid in the conversations I have with young people and the way that they learn and change their trajectory. Our culture faces a meaning crisis. The two things that have led our culture the last century were heaven and profits, and we're probably going to need some other force as we run into this physical and social limits to growth in the coming decade.

(00:45:54):

So let me ask you a tough question. Understanding today's problems, and we've talked about some of them, do you ever look back and wish that senators and congressmen in the '80s and '90s would've done something different? Do you ever think, well, I wish we could have accomplished X?

Dick Gephardt (00:46:11):

Oh, absolutely. If I could go back and chronicle my mistakes, my failures, it would be a long list. None of us is perfect, we're just human beings, all you can do is try your best and do whatever you can do. And if everybody does that, that's about as good as it gets. And you're always going to have mistakes. There are some things that I'm proud of, there are some things that I will take to my grave. The Iraq War is one of them.

(00:46:49):

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And to bore you with that story for a minute, when 9/11 happened, we came back to the White House with the president and vice president a couple days after that, and everybody said something. When I got my chance I said, "Mr. President, the only thing that counts now is that we trust one another. We can't blame one another for this, we can't try to get political high ground on this. Politics gets into everything we do here, but on this stuff, we failed. We all failed. We failed miserably. 3000 people are dead, their families have been destroyed. Our highest responsibility is to keep the people safe, we failed, and we got to do better, and the only way we do that is if we trust one another."

(00:47:37):

Well, we did that. President Bush called us back to the White House every Tuesday morning at 7:00 AM, the four Leaders, House and Senate and the president and vice president, and we worked on security issues from terrorism. We stood up the TSA, which nobody thought we could do, and so we cut off that way that terrorists could harm people. About four months after those meetings started, and it went on for a year, President Bush started to talk about Iraq and that he thought that Saddam Hussein had developed weapons of mass destruction, or was developing them, and they could wind up in the hands of terrorists. We had reports of a scientist in Pakistan who the CIA thought was passing nuclear advice onto terrorists, and so on. And our great fear then, still is, is that somebody knock off a nuclear weapon in the United States, which would be unthinkable, terribly destructive to the country.

(00:48:41):

So he began to talk about we got to do something about Saddam Hussein, so I piped up right away and said, "If this is about getting rid of Saddam Hussein because he's a bad guy, I will never vote for it. There's too many bad guys for us to deal with. But if I become convinced, and I'm going to do my own investigation, that he really has, or the beginnings, or actually has weapons of mass destruction, they can wind up in the hands of terrorists, then I would be willing to look at something. But it's got to be done if we do it with the UN and other allies, and so on.

(00:49:16):

Long story short, I did all my investigation, I went out to the CIA repeatedly, talked to even advisors on intelligence from foreign countries, became convinced that he had these weapons, or had the beginnings of a nuclear technology, and I sponsored the

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resolution to go to war at the great consternation of many of my colleagues in my caucus. And I told him, "This is my decision, it's not your decision, you can come to any decision you want, but do the investigation, do the work. This is one of the biggest decisions you'll ever make in public life." So it passed, and then we go off to war in Iraq, and he didn't have weapons. He was running a PR effort to convince his neighboring countries that he could wump up on them with nuclear weapons, or whatever.

(00:50:12):

But we were wrong, it was our mistake. We made a mistake. I didn't do enough research, I didn't work hard enough, I failed, and every time I'd go out to Walter Reed and see kids with their legs blown off, or their eyes blown out from the war in Iraq, I'd blame myself, and I'll never get over that. I will carry that guilt to my grave. That's what public service is supposed to be about. So you make mistakes, and you're always going to make mistakes, people today are going to make mistakes, but all you can do is try your very best to not make mistakes, to make good decisions, to really work together to try to solve problems. But you're never going to have 100% record. In fact, if you get a 51% record of success over failure, that's pretty good. But we're not going to have any success, we're not going to do anything, if we don't get back to a culture in this country of bipartisanship and being willing to listen to one another and reach necessary compromises to move the country forward.

Nate Hagens (00:51:34):

You probably don't know this, but we have a bunch of mutual friends, and I often tell them that when I talk to Dick and I hang up, it's one of the few times in my life that I instantly feel like being a better person. And I didn't think that would happen on a podcast, but I'm getting that feeling. You're always a leader, once a leader, always a leader, and you do naturally make people want to be better than they've been, and it's a gift, and I hope that some young people listening can take that as wisdom and maybe you're passing the baton to them to have that impact on other people. So can you tell me, if you're willing, compare the moment when you were whisked out of DC, I think on helicopters, during 9/11, and contrast that to what happened on January 6th last year as you were watching?

Dick Gephardt (00:52:36):

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Well, 9/11 was a seminal event in the history of the country. We had never been attacked, other than Pearl Harbor, on the mainland by enemies or adversaries or terrorists, or whatever. So I was whisked out of the Capitol after the first building had been hit but hadn't fallen, and the Capitol Police said, "We got to take you to the headquarters, we think we're going to implement the survival of government plan." Because we didn't know what was happening, we didn't know how many other cities would be hit, we didn't know if Washington was going to be hit. We had heard there's a plane headed for the Capitol, where I was, so they had to get us out of there for sure. But we just didn't know the depth or the width of this attack, and it could be nuclear in addition to what was already done.

(00:53:35):

So they said, "We're going to implement this by helicoptering the four leaders independently, separately, on four different helicopters, to take you out to a military base in Virginia where we can fortify you and keep you safe." And so we took off from the Capitol lawn and went out over the Pentagon, and I looked down at the Pentagon and it was in flames and smoke, and all I could think was the Germans and Japanese would've given their eye teeth to do this in World War II, but they couldn't pull it off with armies of thousands and thousands of people. Four people did this, not completely alone, but four people accomplished this attack on the military headquarters of the United States. That shows you the kind of world you're in today with today's transportation, communications, technology, I mean, a very few people can inflict great damage and harm.

(00:54:44):

So you know the rest of the story, when I came back I told the president we had to trust one another. I mean, we were all in shock, and frankly none of us really, we knew about Al-Qaeda, we knew about Osama bin Laden, but not all that much, and we really didn't understand why this group of people was so angry and amped up over western countries like the United States. So we were on a quick learning curve, but that was a seminal event. January the 6th was an attack from within. It wasn't an attack by a group of people that you've never heard of or that were not Americans. This is Americans storming the capitol to interrupt in a constitutional process of verifying an election of President of the United States. I sat in front of the television

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and tears rolled down my cheeks because I couldn't imagine how something like this could be happening in our country.

(00:55:56):

And the worst part for me now is that I think this could happen repeatedly. We've got many people who are so angered by what they think is happening in our country and our government that there's a conspiracy by Democrats, and I guess others, to have a fraudulent election, that the election was unfair, that it was stolen, that it was completely a fraud. And when you get to that point, I can see why people become violent. I mean, if you really believe that this has happened and that the only way you can bring the country back to sanity is to go in and kill the vice president, or stop him from verifying the election, then that's what you're going to do. That's how far off this thing has gotten. So 9/11 was a unifying thing for the country, I'll never forget.

(00:57:08):

Most people in the country out in the Midwest, where I'm from, don't think much about New York, and they frankly don't respect New York that much, or New Yorkers. I've always been a runner, I used to be a runner, I'm now a walker because running is bad for your joints, but I always went out and ran in the morning. And so on Christmas, the Christmas after 9/11, I took my mother down to DeSoto, Missouri, a little town 30 miles from St. Louis where her sister lived, and we had a Christmas event with her and her family, as we had often done. But that morning I got up in my aunt's house and I went out running in the streets of DeSoto, Missouri, and I was shocked. Every house in that little community, and it was a small community, had a sign with an American flag and a sign that said, "We are praying for New York." That's national unity. People in DeSoto, Missouri cared about what had happened to these people in New York, even though it was 1600 miles from DeSoto, Missouri.

(00:58:31):

Now, in January 6th, we had the opposite of that. We had Americans thinking that other Americans had stolen an election and that they had to make it right. I understand their mindset, and there's a lot of reasons they reached that mindset. Part of it was what President Trump was putting out day and night. But it's the information culture, I'll take you back to that. They were being told on the internet, on social media, amplifying everything that President Trump was saying. So they became, in

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effect, brainwashed. They were living in an alternative reality, and if you're living in an alternative reality that creates the desire to use violence to make it right.

Nate Hagens (00:59:23):

Yeah, I'm not an expert on it, but I've concluded that we have to fix that problem or we're not going to fix anything else, so I hope you can be successful in your bipartisan efforts on the social media thing. So you are 80 years young, and I'm 25 years younger than you, I wish I had the energy and mental clarity that you always do. What is your secret? What are some recommendations to have such vitality at your age? Any secrets?

Dick Gephardt (00:59:53):

Well, there's no secrets it's, again, what I learned from my mother, treat other people the way you'd like to be treated. If you keep that as your north star, you'll always be in a pretty good place. Second is work hard. Nothing comes without hard work, whether you're making a product, or you're creating a business, or you're a worker in a business, you're worried about your community, your country. The first job I ever ran for was city council in St. Louis, and I really wanted my community, St. Louis, which was really in decline by that time. It was one of the great American cities, it was the third-biggest city in the United States in 1900, and it really had declined, and people weren't taking care of their property, and the city didn't have enough money to pave the streets right, and all that.

(01:00:51):

And so five young people got on the board of Alderman, we call it, it was the board of Alderman, it was the city council. We formed community corporations all over the town, and we got citizens together and we encouraged them to fix up their houses, fix up their community, have programs for the youth, recreation programs, programs for the elderly, social programs, so they could get together. And it was a fabulous effort, and anybody can do that. And so we all need to look around in our community where we are and see, what are the needs, what can we do? And what can we work at? But you got to work at it, you got to go out there every day, you got to get up out of bed encouraged and excited about solving problems and making something happen. And if you treat people right, you will be a leader.

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(01:01:49):

Leadership is all about getting people to trust you, not that you know everything, or not that you have all the answers, or not that you're some special person, you're not, we're all equal. But we're a team, we work together, we love one another, we work together to solve our common problems. And if you do that, you're going to make a difference in your life. I'll add one other thing, I think it'll keep you young. I mean, you need good health, and I'm lucky to have good health, maybe it's my genes from my parents, but you got to take care of yourself, you got to eat and you got to do some exercise. But most importantly, you have to be involved in whatever your purpose is in life and work at it every day. If you do those three things, life's really great.

Nate Hagens (01:02:46):

Well, the one cultural evolution that you pass to me is your recommendation to always have a tub of ice-cold water with raw vegetables in the fridge, and that's the one thing I've added to my routine.

Dick Gephardt (01:03:00):

Yeah. I don't want to give health advice, but I truly believe we do better with two meals a day that are both accomplished within an eight-hour window.

Nate Hagens (01:03:11):

Oh, so you do that, the intermittent fasting thing?

Dick Gephardt (01:03:14):

Yeah, yeah, and eat as many vegetables as you can. So I keep a bowl of raw vegetables, cauliflower, carrots, radishes, celery, and I've gotten to the point, I always liked those things, but I didn't really eat them that much. Now I look forward to that meal in the morning, about 11:00 in the morning, I am really excited about eating those vegetables. They are so good. I can almost get by doing nothing but that in the two meals.

Nate Hagens (01:03:44):

That's amazing. All right, I'm going to try that. So thank you so much for your time. You probably are aware of this, but Tom Downey is a mutual colleague, these people

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behind your back refer to you as a saint and a national treasure and a superman in our culture. So as a lifelong public servant, do you have any other closing words for the listeners, for the Americans, the citizens listening to this?

Dick Gephardt (01:04:15):

None of us is better than anybody else, we're just people on this planet, and we have an obligation to try to... I was a Boy scout and we used to go out on camping trips and our scoutmaster used to say, "We got to leave the campsite better than we found it." Well, that's it, we all have that obligation and we can all do that, and we can all succeed at that.

Nate Hagens (01:04:42):

Well, that's my hope. We have to meet the future halfway, and you and I didn't really have time today to talk about the concept of advance policy or climate change, but maybe I'll have you back in a couple months and we can take a deeper dive on that, and hopefully our social media infrastructure will have improved by that point.

Dick Gephardt (01:05:03):

Okay.

Nate Hagens (01:05:03):

Thank you so much, Leader Gephardt, for your time.

Dick Gephardt (01:05:05):

Great, thanks so much. Great to be with you.

Nate Hagens (01:05:09):

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