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Intelligence Squared U.S. Special Release: How to Debate ... Yourself

In Conversation:

John Donovan & Peter Schuck

John Donovan:

Hey there, everybody. This is John Donovan, and welcome to the latest take in our series that focuses on the QOD of our times, the quality of discourse, where what we try to get at is the question of how we're doing at talking with each other or not. And, frankly, it's the "not" that is making this interesting, these times that we're living in when people hold views that are so polarized that they don't even want to look at each other, much less hear what each other has to say.

And of course that's what Intelligence Squared U.S. is all about, by setting up a framework known as, well, Oxford Style debate, with its own rules and obligation of civility and the requirement that our debaters work to prove that they're right, not just assert their ideas, but actually make an argument for them.

We do see opposing viewpoints in the people who hold them actually talking to each other and interacting, and maybe even learning from each other across from fairly complex and contentious issues.

Well, today I'm going to be talking to an author and thinker who has given a lot attention to the question of how all of us can try to think clearly on these hard issues. Sort of how to debate with yourself on the way to figuring out what position you want to take on issues like immigration or poverty or affirmative action.

Before we get to that, though, I wanted to tell you about September 13th. That is the start date for our fall season. I will be hosting that debate in New York City, but we will be livestreaming in case you can't get there. It's a night that's going to be headlined by a conversation about America's best global strategy in a world of threats. It will feature General David Petraeus in conversation with my good friend, the military historian, Max Boot. And right after that, we are going to go straight to a debate, zeroing in on China and the question of China's rising influence and power economically and politically and militarily with the question being, "Should the U.S. try to contain that rise or get out of the way or do something in between?" So, that is September 13th at New York City.

You can find details at our website, iq2us.org.

Now, I don't know if you've heard yet of the book, "One Nation Undecided," by Peter Schuck because it's one that we've been passing around at Intelligence Squared U.S. So neatly does it overlap with our goals of inspiring folks to think more deeply and to debate and to debate better, Peter's book is an argument for thinking clearly. That's how he puts it. And it's also something of a how-to book on a variety of issues. He's got some intriguing insights. And so, it is a pleasure to have him on the podcast. Peter Schuck, welcome to Intelligence Squared U.S.

Peter Schuck:

Thank you, John. It's great to be here.

John Donovan:

Your -- so your book is called, "One Nation Undecided." Full title is, "Clear Thinking About Five Hard Issues That Divide Us." I was going to say, "Divide the U.S." -- "That Divide Us." What was the impetus behind writing this book?

Peter Schuck:

Well, it's very clear to me that we don't -- we speak past one another. We speak to ourselves. And even when we speak to ourselves, we don't ask very hard questions of ourselves in the sense that we don't want to test our beliefs. We're comfortable with them and that's generally the end of it. And I believe the issues that I discuss and many others are so complicated, involve so many conflicting values and empirical claims and worldviews that this is wrong and need to be corrected.

John Donovan:

You -- Peter, your introduction -- your first chapter, actually, is a bit of a manifesto on this question of how well-informed we are as citizens to debate these issues. And your -- your assessment of the present is pretty pessimistic. Just quoting from you, you say, "Public debate on hard issues today is woefully deficient. Citizens do not yet know what they need to know in order to make informed decisions about hard issues." Let's start with some definitions. What do you mean by the "hard issues?"

Peter Schuck:

By "hard issue," I mean those questions that are hotly debated about which there's a great deal of disagreement, much of it legitimate disagreement, concerning the -- what the relevant facts are, how to define the issue, what the tradeoffs are as between conflicting values, and how to resolve those conflicts. That's a very rationalistic way of proceeding, and that's my game. I'm committed to it. So, I think that's the way in which we can make some progress.

John Donovan:

You talk about the term, “debate.” You know, obviously this is of interest to us because we do debates at Intelligence Squared U.S. in this very formal sense. But you make the point in the book, Peter, that actually, as a society, we are, in a sense, debating all the time. Perhaps not at a level that you consider admirable, but that you point out that people are debating at their dinner tables and at work, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So, tell me what you mean by debate and public debate, and particularly when you say that public debate on hard issues is “woefully deficient today.”

Peter Schuck:

Well, I mean two things. First of all, I mean an internal debate, that is to say, “How do people go about making up their minds about a hard issue?” And I’m advocating a very rationalistic way of trying to identify the relevant facts, try to understand the conflicting versions of those facts, and then bring the relevant values to bear, understanding that they are conflicting values and they are often legitimate conflicts. So, at that level, it’s a way of people making up their minds about what they think.

But in the process of doing that, they need to listen to other people and they need to read what others have said. And that requires a suspension of belief, if you will, in which people are actually open to those sorts of inputs. And, in order to do that, you have to realize how hard these issues are in the first place so that you should feel somewhat less certainty in your views than you probably do.

And, as I say in the book, I don’t really care where people come out on these issues. As I said, there are legitimate viewpoints based on different versions of contested facts and different values and different tradeoffs, but I do want people to think very clearly about them. And when they do that and they recognize how hard these issues are, then I think they will have more respect for the views of other people who come out differently.

John Donvan:

What are the elements of clear thinking?

Peter Schuck:

Well, first is -- first is to define the issue, and to do that is very complicated. I have a chapter on -- first chapter is on poverty, for example. And in order to think clearly about poverty, you want to clarify, “What is the difference between poverty and inequality?” which are two very important ideas that are often conflated. Then you need to understand how to define the issues such as poverty, and there are lots of different ways of measuring poverty, and most of them are not straightforward. Then, you need to think about the causes. And there are a variety of causes of poverty and I discuss each of those.

And then, you need to look at what the existing programs are and how effective they’ve been, what the performance of these government programs and other programs has

been. And then, think about how we might reform those systems that are deficient. And so I lay out the various options for policy reform.

John Donovan:

You know, in our debates, we have a -- the way that we structure our debates, in the beginning of the evening, we ask the audience to tell us where they stand on the motion. And we've actually done a number of motions that overlap with the topics you take on in your book.

For example, affirmative action, we've twice debated whether affirmative action is actually meeting the goals that its proponents intended. We've debated campaign finance reform. We've debated immigration a number of times. We've even debated the role of religion in public life with the motion, "America is too damn religious," we did a few years back. And, in all of these debates, in the beginning, we ask the audience where did they stand on the issue? And they're given the option of being for the motion, against the motion, or undecided. And significantly we often have a very large number of undecided audience members at the beginning of the debate, maybe 30 percent, sometimes as high as 40 percent.

And it always occurs to me that there's two ways to be undecided. One is that you just don't know anything about the issue or you're truly conflicted, you've thought about it. And the other part is that it's just a decision by the audience member on that night that, "I'm going to listen impartially. I'm going to listen to what both sides can bring." And I'm somewhat inspired by that assumption by my part on their impartiality, to whether - - to ask this question, "Do you think that an impartiality is required to do the kind of thinking that you're talking about?" By that, I mean, do you need to be willing to say, "I'm just going to go where the evidence leads?"

Peter Schuck:

Well, it's a little unrealistic in view of everything we know about social psychology, to expect that people are going to be blank slates. But, by and large, we've formed at least preliminary views about things, what is possible, I think, is that people understand how very difficult these issues are and that other reasonable people come at those with a different perspective and weighing the tradeoffs and values differently, and defining them differently.

That's about the best we can do, I think, is to try to inculcate that sense of respect for other people who disagree with us and then try to understand what their arguments are, and then finally make an assessment.

John Donovan:

What's the benefit of that respect?

Peter Schuck:

It enables us to listen and to question our beliefs and to take a fresh view of what --

something we thought was settled.

John Donovan:

You write in the book, "A perpetual news cycle and ubiquitous social media inhibit deliberation." Is the regular voter's ability to think things through harmed now by the perpetual news cycle on social media?

Peter Schuck:

Well, I think it is, but it's not -- it's really not the news cycle's fault. It's not the media's fault. It's simply that we are subjected to a welter of information and claims even when we only watch MSNBC or Fox News. And we really have a craving to take a position and to be committed to it because we view many of these issues as highly moralized.

And there is, especially among young people, as I said before, a very fierce impetus to be -- think of themselves as upright, moral, righteous people in holding these particular views without considering the fact that equally upright, moral people are on the other side.

John Donovan:

You talk about a term you use, "intellectual capacity objection." And what you're saying is that some people might look at your call for people to educate themselves more, to read more deeply, and think more clearly, and they might object that not everybody can do that.

John Donovan:

First of all, not everybody necessarily may have just the intellectual firepower. They may not have the time. They may not have the level of education. And I think that's a pretty -- that seems like a pretty powerful objection, actually, to what you're talking about. Not everybody can -- is going to be a student in your class whose job at that time is to study these issues. What is the response to the objection -- the intellectual capacity objection?

Peter Schuck:

Well, I think the objection -- as I say in the book, the objection is a legitimate one. And I guess the only response is that we need to do the best we can. And different people will respond to different types of presentations and so forth. But the greater their ability to process information and open themselves to the array of values that are implicated by a particular issue, I think the sounder their resulting position will be. But it is -- it is a real problem in our democracy, notwithstanding the fact that people are better educated than ever before, at least in terms of formal credentials. So, they -- we presume that they are better equipped to engage in clear thinking. They -- the difficulty of these issues is very daunting, and so we have an industry of institutions like Intelligence Squared and like our educational institutions, and like much of our excellent media, that has to try to distill this information in a way that is both faithful to the -- to

the evidence, and but not too complicated. It's a very serious challenge.

John Donovan:

A lot of us have shortcuts to reaching the decisions about where we're going to stand on an issue that we may not even be aware of. For example, one shortcut may be, "I belong to the Republican Party. I belong to the Republican Party and, therefore, my position on such-and-such is what the party says because I trust them because they've thought it out." Or maybe that mental shortcut is what your family's politics are. You're going to stick with what your family or what your pastor is talking about. And you're talking about each person individually doing their own work to make their own decisions. Most of us aren't doing it. Let's acknowledge that.

What's wrong with taking those sorts of shortcuts? Something actually -- don't they actually have a meaningful sorting role?

Peter Schuck:

They do. They do, and I'm not opposed to shortcuts, party identification being a very important one. But we also need to appreciate the extent to which those shortcuts are often oversimplifications, ideologically motivated, and are, in some cases, designed to deceive us or get us to stop thinking.

So, we need to factor these shortcuts into our thinking process but also be skeptical of them. And this is hard to do. I -- none of -- what I'm suggesting is simple to do, but to -- again, we have no choice except to try to improve the quality of our democracy by improving the quality of our thinking.

John Donovan:

You used the phrase -- I'm going to start this over again. You read at one point, "powerful arguments exist on all sides of hard issues," and I want to understand when you used the term, "powerful," are you saying that they are convincing, necessarily? Because, if they're convincing, shouldn't they be -- doesn't that basically mean that they're right?

Peter Schuck:

I mean, that they're convincing too many reasonable people, and that ought to induce in us a respect and an openness for understanding what those points of view are, where they're coming from and what they're based on. But, ultimately, we have to make up our own minds and we can and will, inevitably, rely on some of the shortcuts that we just discussed.

John Donovan:

If everybody were to undertake the -- your prescription for clear thinking which means doing some hard work, some hard reading, learning the facts, questioning your assumptions, et cetera, if everybody were to work off of the same basic material, is the

implication of this that most of us would come to the same conclusion? Would clear thinking lead all of us to the same place?

Peter Schuck:

[laughs] That's a great question and I think the answer is clear, "No, it would not." And the reason for that, as I explain in the book, is that every hard issue is a -- is a mixture of value judgments and tradeoffs that people can make differently, even if they're -- even if they're agreed on the facts. But the best thing we can do, I think, is to try to understand the facts as accurately as possible and then be explicit about what our tradeoffs are and then come out where we come out. So, I completely agree with your implication that we would not in the end all agree.

That's why these issues are hard issues, because reasonable people can come out at different points. But I think that the areas, the domain of disagreement, would be considerably narrower, and perhaps more important, our civility, our respect for those who with whom we are engaging in thinking about these issues would be heightened. And that we could certainly use in our current social milieu.

John Donovan:

It's an interesting thing about the Intelligence Squared U.S. debates. We have a lot of contact with out, for want of a better word, our fans, including people who are listening to this podcast. But I meet a lot of them face-to-face after the debates, themselves, on the evenings in New York and the other places we do them. And I chat with them in the lobby afterwards and the one thing that really seems to excite people is they say, "I --" two things is, "I never heard the other side of the argument put that way before, and I've really got to think about that." That's one thing.

But the other thing is it was so nice to see a tough conversation, and they mean tough. It was robust and it was rigorous, but carried out with such civility that, in the end, the two teams could stand up and shake hands with each other, that a mutual respect developed. And that's kind of -- that's one of the things that people say to me is, for them, the real kind of secret sauce of Intelligence Squared U.S. and why they keep coming.

So, it's -- I find it encouraging that your -- you have that belief that people actually reading through to the issues will stop the process of having to demonize their opponents just because they disagree.

Peter Schuck:

Let me say one thing about civility because I've written elsewhere about civility. And it's, of course, an enormous virtue. It's an indispensable virtue in a democracy or in a family or in almost any other setting. But increasingly, I think, people have used -- have demanded civility in situations in which they don't really want civility, they want the other side to shut up.

John Donovan:
[laughs] So true.

Peter Schuck:

And so, I've written an article about this and I've given a number of examples of this. I wrote that article, well, more than 10 years ago. But, I think, the point is even stronger today. So, when we invoke civility as a cardinal virtue, I certainly agree with that, and my book hopes to promote that. But we need to be careful how we -- how we -- what we mean when we speak of civility and whether we're trying to advance deliberation or actually shut it down.

John Donovan:

Well, another corollary to that is very often when people say, "There should be more debate," on such and such topic. What they really mean is, "The other side should be given more information so that they agree with me."

Peter Schuck:

Yes, I think that's true. We do -- we do have a great deal of debate in our society. As we discussed at the outset, there are numerous settings in which people discuss issues with one another, but increasingly we're discussing them only with people who agree with us, and that's just an echo chamber.

And we -- we're too self-confident in our views. And if we reduced our self-confidence just a little bit, I think we would hear much that would enlighten us and possibly change our views.

John Donovan:

Peter Schuck's book is called, "One Nation Undecided: Clear Thinking about Five Hard Issues that Divide Us." If you are a fan of Intelligence Squared U.S., consider looking into it. Like our debates, this book is about the value of facts and logic and critical thinking, and being opened to changing your mind. Peter Schuck, thanks so much for joining us on Intelligence Squared U.S.

Peter Schuck:

Thank you, John.

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