

Beyond War: Causes of Conflict, Prospects for Peace Conference
June 2, Dinner Program Speakers

Yochi Dreazen Remarks

Hi. Good evening. It's very hard to be following a person accompanied by beautiful guitar playing, drums and gorgeous singing! I will do my best so please bare with me.

Thank you all for coming. Thank you also for giving an excuse for my wife and I to stash our toddlers at home and get out as fast as we could.

I want to talk to you briefly about the Pulitzer Center, as Jon mentioned, because I have both received money and been able to do reporting of my own. I have also been able to send reporters who work for me to do the kind of reporting I wish I could still do before I became management scum.

Much of my career was in the places that Donald Trump would refer to colloquially as "blank hole" countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Mali, Lebanon, Syria, places like that. Now, in my current job we are trying to find ways of covering that by hiring freelancers who are talented or by sending our own staff.

With the Pulitzer Center's help we sent a reporter last year to France to write about Marine Le Pen. One story she did that resonated was about Nazi hunters who came out of retirement thinking their work was done but figured they had to do something to battle Marine Le Pen. I found their story very powerful.

Another reporter who works for me now is heading to Hungary to do a story about what it looks like on the ground when a democracy dies. There's a resonance you can draw based under politics whether you want to or don't. What he'll see there in terms of the way media has been stifled, the way the courts have been corrupted, the way the justice system has been politicized, they are obviously resonances to here as well. That kind of work, those kind of trips could be done only with the help of the Pulitzer Center and I am grateful for them as an editor.

I am also grateful as a reporter because some of the trips I've done that I'm most proud of that led to the stories I'm most proud of, happened solely because of Pulitzer support. There's one I want to flag briefly because parts of the way the reporting developed, illustrate in some ways why the center is so valuable.

A couple years ago, I went to Northern Mali for about a month to do a story for *The Atlantic*. Northern Mali at the time was the first place that an Islamic group had ever

conquered – so pre-ISIS. This was the first time that an Al-Qaeda offshoot had conquered territory and governed it. I went to cover the war that was designed to dislodge them. The war was successful, it was led by the French fighting from the air and African armies fighting on the ground. I went for about a month. What I was able to do, because I had that time there, was do what you have to do when you're reporting overseas. No matter how well you've prepared something, there is going to be something that goes wrong, always. So no matter how much you think you can jam all the reporting for a trip into a week—some part of the week will go horribly awry. Usually benignly, at times less so.

Being there when you have that much time means you can really listen to the texture of an interview because you're not just trying to get a quote quickly and move on. You have time to pay attention to how does a person speak, what are their mannerisms, what are they wearing, if they have multiple cellphones, who are they calling, if they chain smoke, what cigarettes are they smoking, the little details to make those stories very rich. You can't get them if you're there just for a week or two weeks.

You can't follow your instinct, and if you're on the ground—many people who are in this room, who are very talented and very brave have done it in very dangerous places—there are times when your instincts tells you don't go to a certain place even if you think you might need it for your story and there are times your instinct tells you to go to that place because the story will be fascinating. At one point on this trip we got to a checkpoint where the soldiers were listening to a song and they were all sort of bobbing their heads to it. I asked what it was and it was a song by a musician that was calling for war. We here, in this country, we think of musicians always being anti-war. This is a musician who had been displaced by this invasion, and was calling for war.

The name of the musician is Baba Salah. When I headed back to Bamako, the capital of Mali, I went and I looked him up and we ended up spending about seven hours in his house and just listening to music. At one point he picked up a guitar, and said, "Can I play something for you?" I was like, "Sure, world-famous musician, please do." He picked up an acoustic guitar and played effortlessly one of the most beautiful things I'd ever heard that was dedicated to his mother who had just died. That's the kind of thing that you can't do with a short amount of time, something that you can't do absent resources, and it's the kind of thing that you really can't do as a journalist at a place like that.

Part of what we are trying to do at Vox, is also something that can be done by people in this room.

Pulitzer Center provides funding and that's enormously valuable, but there's something else that it does which is also valuable, especially in my current job. We are trying to find pieces from overseas that are written by people native to those countries, ideally women. We are trying to find freelancers or people of color. It's hard to find, to link up with people who may be able to do those stories. They may not know who we are, we may not know who they are. The Pulitzer Center can provide that linkage, can be the connective tissue of us in Washington and that reporter in Colombia, Lebanon, Syria or South Sudan that we otherwise would have no way of reaching, that otherwise wouldn't know who we were and we would have no way of finding the incredible work they do.

I will close with this. For a site like *Vox*, which is a general interest site, it's a win, win. It's good for us and it's good for the journalists. For us, we assume readers who come to our site are interested in the news but not expert in it. They might know something is happening in South Sudan, but not know anything beyond that. If we want them to read our story, the story has to be compelling. It has to be human, it has to be vivid. You can't do that absent that kind of reporting.

On the other side of it, if you're that sort of reporter you want your work to be read, you want your photos to be seen, your video to be seen, your podcast to be heard, we can provide that platform.

The linkage that provides them with us, us with them is in many ways because of the Pulitzer Center. I want to thank Jon, Nathalie, Tom Hundley, Ann Peters, and others in the Center, who have been part of it and have worked with me over the years in different capacities because the work that I've been able to do—both as a real journalist and now as an editor—is in many ways thanks to them. So Jon, thank you. Nathalie, thank you. Tom Hundley, thank you. All of you, thank you.