REPORTING (From the Loser's Locker Room and Elsewhere)
DAVID REMNICK IN CONVERSATION WITH PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER
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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber and I'm the director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, now known as LIVE from the New York Public Library, as you know. I'm not supposed to say this, because I say it each time, my goal at the Library is to oxygenate the Library, for sure, but to make the lions roar. Among the upcoming events at the Library, we are going to have, in a couple of weeks, John Updike being interviewed by Mr. Goldberg, also from the *New Yorker*. We are going to have, later in the year, at the end of June, an event on *Slate*. *Slate* is celebrating its tenth birthday. And then we will have a cooking evening, where I hope actually Mario Batali and Anthony Bourdain and maybe even Bill Buford will cook for us. That evening is called Kitchen Secrets. Hopefully, also, at the very end of the year, Wes Anderson will be in the Library in the Reading Room, filming together with Fran Lebowitz and Wally Shawn. Next year you might like to come and hear Frank Rich, Chris Anderson, Cameron Sinclair, Jan Morris, E. O. Wilson, and many more. I encourage you to join our e-mail list. Anybody who joins today gets two free tickets. Anybody who joins tomorrow gets four. **(laughter)**

Well, tonight, it is my really great pleasure to introduce David Remnick. And I won't really introduce him, because he's actually going to have a conversation with me. We have a few things in common, though many things that are not in common. I've never worked for the *Washington Post*, for instance, and I never, or not so far, have worked for the *New Yorker*. But we do have three things in common, and one of them I'd like to mention immediately to get out of the way because I know that most of you are very interested in this fact. We both studied Comparative Literature at Princeton University. **(smattering of hoots)** That's interesting. And he talks about himself as "the opposite of a specialist" and I would tend to believe that I am also the opposite of a specialist. The only advantage I have over David Remnick is that, while he got an undergraduate degree in comparative literature, I got a graduate degree in comparative literature, which gave me a Ph.D. When I got my Ph.D., my father sent me a cartoon from the *New Yorker* and—because he wasn't very impressed. I already PH and I got D, you know, five years for one letter? **(laughter)** He sent me a cartoon from the *New Yorker* and it—you see a maître d' taking a reservation and the maître d' says on the phone, "Tell me, is this for a medical doctor or a mere Ph.D.?" **(laughter)** So the *New Yorker* has had a great influence over my life. To talk about what he himself refers to as "my weirdo career," it is my great pleasure to welcome the editor of the *New Yorker*, David Remnick.

(applause)

So, "your weirdo career."

DAVID REMNICK: Pretty weird.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So we have a few things in common and one of them is literature—comparative literature.

DAVID REMNICK: We used to call it "Fancy English."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: True, it's a strange thing, people always ask me, what do we compare, really? **(laughter)** There's one piece that I really take to in your collection *Reporting*, which is your piece on translation, and I would like us to start there, because I'm sure you're getting a lot of questions about Al Gore, maybe a few too many questions about Al Gore.

DAVID REMNICK: "What is Al Gore really like?"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And?

DAVID REMNICK: I think we know.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Okay. And you probably are getting quite a few questions on Israel and a number of subjects—Katrina—and we might talk about some of those, but I thought, given where we are, and given the fact that we have these elective affinities for comparative literature, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that essay. I'm curious why you wrote it and how it might actually have a significance for you in terms of what you consider reporting to be, because mistranslation in some way—which, you know, the old line—and my question will end, I promise you—**(laughter)** the old line of *traduttore, traditore*, translator, traitor, is operational here and you compare and contrast two translations of Russian literature, so tell us a little bit about that.

DAVID REMNICK: I, I, again, my grades at Princeton in Russian were C+ and a D. Therefore I made my living at it **(laughter)** and I can no more read *The Brothers Karamazov* in Russian than I can scale Mount Everest in skates. **(laughter)** That said, you know, what I wanted to write about was how we receive these foreign novels, these things that shape the way we think and feel and all the rest, and most particularly Russian novels, and we receive Russian literature mainly through the services—or we have in English for decades—through the good offices of this odd woman named Constance Garnett, and everybody in the room has either given a crack at or read their way through Tolstoy, and some of Turgenev, lots of Chekhov, and Dostoyevsky, because of

this oddball woman, Constance Garnett, who almost went blind translating these Russian classics at a furious pace. And it came to pass that I began to find out that people who actually knew Russian—Nabokov, certainly, and Joseph Brodsky—began to—there's a whole literature on why Constance Garnett is a bad translator, which I don't believe, by the way, I think she's a heroic translator in many ways, simply because she brought these Russian classics forward.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is she heroic because of the *amount* she translated?

DAVID REMNICK: By industry, by sheer industry.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which is something you like.

DAVID REMNICK: I do like that. I do like that. But it doesn't end at that, obviously, that's not the only thing. Constance Garnett had lousy eyes and she would sit there in an English garden translating *War and Peace*, by the way, a great deal more quickly than Tolstoy wrote the novel, although these translators that I then came to write about, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volohonsky have translated Tolstoy and Dostoevsky far more slowly than Dostoevsky and Tolstoy wrote their novels.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think you mentioned that *Anna Karenina* is supposed to come out—no, it's *War and Peace*—is supposed to come out in 2006.

DAVID REMNICK: There was just a new *War and Peace*, and you'll be glad to know that their *War and Peace* will be coming in two years, just in case you don't get to it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Are they keeping to their deadline?

DAVID REMNICK: Ruthlessly. Ruthlessly.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because I know you're also interested in deadlines.

DAVID REMNICK: So I—the piece was partly about the difficulties of dealing with these Russian classics. Dealing with predecessors of translation and the problems of translation and surreptitiously it was also about, although it only appears explicitly, about my own struggles with the Russian language, which are significant and ongoing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And also with what you, in a way, Constance Garnett—

DAVID REMNICK: In a way, it's a lousy profile for me because these people don't *do* anything. For me, a profile—it helps a great deal if you actually watch somebody do something. They race a car, or run for office, or do human-rights work, and you tag along and you do this process that comes with the horrible phrase of "fly on the wall." These are bookish people. They sit in contiguous rooms, in a very small Paris apartment, and they don't see anybody—Pevear and Volohonsky—very much. And he's in charge of the Englishing and she's in charge of getting it from Russian into a kind of rough English, and that's their process, and to make this into a story, a profile, as well as a sort of semi-academic piece is the goal.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you did it.

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah, I managed it, I suppose.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I thought it was particularly interesting because some of the—

DAVID REMNICK: Russian is a very, very difficult language and Nabokov, as a professor at Cornell, used to say that if he could get his students to translate the following sentence well he thought he had done his job: "These boys are crossing those bridges." That's the best he could do. It's an impossible language to really get to the end of, for me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Nabokov wrote one of my favorite books on Gogol, where he bemoans the fact that people are reading Gogol in the English because how can you read Gogol in the English if you don't even know that it's supposed to be Go*gol*—if you can't even pronounce the name.

DAVID REMNICK: But this is nonsense.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Of course it's nonsense.

DAVID REMNICK: It's really nonsense. After all it is prose and the differences if you *really* bear down on it, the differences between Constance Garnett and Pevear and Volohonsky may impress Nabokov or a modern Russian reader tremendously, but it's really a very nuanced thing. The thing that happened to Pevear and Volohonsky of course that thrust them forward in the literary world . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is Oprah.

DAVID REMNICK: . . .is Oprah. Richard Pevear was sitting in his apartment in Paris and he got a phone call and he was told that he had been selected by Oprah, and he had no idea if this was an escort service . . . **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why me? Why me?

DAVID REMNICK: Well, he didn't know, he had no idea if it was an escort service or a country-music singer. And the next thing you know, these people who were living on a very small amount of money suddenly had, you know, a place in Bordeaux and a couple of cars, and they were doing much better.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A couple of cars, so they might become a more interesting profile now.

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: To move around a bit.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I said we had three things in common. Another one is that we have Russian ancestry. Your parents—grandparents, my grandparents, are from Chernovitz, and it's quite a pleasure to have someone on stage with me today, it's probably one of the first times, who actually is more or less my age, so I'm quite pleased by that.

DAVID REMNICK: But I'm beautifully preserved.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, true, true, very, and it's cool enough in this room for us.

DAVID REMNICK: I should tell you that in about 1987 or so the *Washington Post* decided to send me to Russia because no one else would go. It's very cold, and the language is hard, and the food is very fatty, and despite all this revolutionary fervor, no one else wanted to go, and I was very low on the totem pole, to say the least, and it was my duty to fly with my then-girlfriend, soon-to-be wife, Esther Fein, who was working for the *Times*, to a very unusual place for Jews in those days, Miami Beach, Florida, on Collins Ave. to announce to my grandfather, who had left Russia on an ox-cart or something—do they have oxen?—you know, chased by Cossacks and just reaching the border and finally making it to Paterson, New Jersey, by way of Rivington Street, **(laughter)** that I was going to marry this woman, which pleased him—she was suitably Hebraic—**(laughter)** so there was no head-in-oven operation, **(laughter)** but that I was going to move with her and we were going to set up house, as they used to say, in Moscow. And he looked at me and he said, he knew no Russian by the way, there was no need to learn Russian when you lived in these shtetls, these villages, in the Pale of Settlement, he said to me in some mixture of Yiddish and English, "You have lost"—and he was 103—"You have lost your mind." **(laughter)** He just could not conceive of this, that voluntarily, unchased by the American version of Cossacks, that I would move to Moscow and live there with the greatest of pleasure, which I did, which we did, for four years.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think that's a perfect segue for what I'd like to ask you about now. But before getting quite there—I was mentioning Gogol and Nabokov—

DAVID REMNICK: My grandfather never mentioned Gogol. **(laughter)** He had a nose like you wouldn't believe, but he never mentioned Gogol.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Nabokov has this wonderful line where he tries to talk about digression in Gogol, and he says if two parallel lines do not meet, it is not because meet they cannot but because they have other things to do, **(laughter)** so there probably will be a fair amount of digression. I was quite—

DAVID REMNICK: For what these people pay, they can get digression.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: OK, good. I remember when I had you on the phone not long ago I wanted you to say something about yourself.

DAVID REMNICK: It wasn't a long conversation.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, it wasn't a long conversation. But we'll get to that in a little bit. And I asked you, how would you like me to describe you. And you said, "Paul," and then there was a pause which definitely was a comma. "Paul, I'm the editor of the *New Yorker*, is there anything else you would like to know?"

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: Which sounds horrible.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, I thought, this is a man who doesn't have time to lose. He's writing something. He's in the middle of fifty-four plans, no I didn't think it sounded horrible at all.

DAVID REMNICK: I was watching a *Sopranos* episode on my computer. **(laughter)** The Vito episode. Three times.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Subsequently, I read that you have beautiful things to say about editors. You say that they are a mouse training to become a rat. So.

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: I'm already there. As apparently a half a dozen people in this room can easily attest. Philip Gourevitch and Larissa can certainly attest—my ratdom is complete.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You said—well, let's speak about Katharine Graham. That's another extraordinary profile and filled with extraordinary stories about your time in Russia. So I'd like to talk a little bit with you about how the sausage gets made. You have—

DAVID REMNICK: I was the sausage in that case.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You were. I'm particularly—I think neither of us believes in flattery—but I do think that your first sentences are very strong. I like them enormously. I like the first sentence of the Netanyahu essay—

DAVID REMNICK: I think it was my friend Michael Specter who said, who also grew up at the *Washington Post*, that after the lead it's all typing. That may not be an entirely literary point of view, but it is one of the many things that you are taught in the church of newspapers.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, you learned that lesson very well, I feel, because the first sentence of your Netanyahu essay goes something like, "If Paris is the City of Light, Jerusalem is the City of Opinion." The first sentence of the Katharine Graham essay, and then maybe you can elaborate a little bit on it, goes something like this, it actually goes like this exactly. **(laughter)**

DAVID REMNICK: I'll whistle.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: "In my boyhood as a reporter I nearly killed the matriarch of the liberal media conspiracy."

DAVID REMNICK: It's very true. Katharine Graham, who needless to say had very little—I had met her once before. She would have what's called a New Employee Lunch every so often. After I had been there for four years I went to a New Employee Lunch and she had—and by the way I worship her—so even—she's dead any number of years, I still call her Mrs. Graham, I wouldn't dare—the whole familiar Kay thing—that's not going to happen. I went to this New Employee Lunch and I was covering sports, because that's what they would let me do at this point. I was covering the National Basketball Association, which was not that dear to her heart. Nor was boxing. **(laughter)** And she had her card, you know, kind of like Queen Elizabeth, and she came to me and she said, "David Rennick, you cover the BNA."

"I do."

Five years later I was in Moscow for six months and it was announced to us in the Bureau, which sounds like there were twenty people there, there were two of us, and I was the number two, that Katharine Graham would be coming to interview Mikhail Gorbachev, and an interview with Mikhail Gorbachev in those days was a very, very big deal. Now, he'll open a grocery store, **(laughter)** but he was in the process of dissolving the last empire on earth, except this one. **(laughter)** And she was going to come. And we all thought, this is fantastic. We're going to interview Gorbachev. Wrong. She brought a flotilla of editors and, as they say in Russian, *shiski*, big pinecones, big shots, and my job—I had one suit, which is more than you really needed in those days in Moscow. And the only time I wore this suit in four years was to dress up to drive Katharine Graham to a hairdresser. Because these trips were very planned out and they were really nervous-making. There had been two instances—at least that I had heard of—of these trips that she would make. One of them was, say, Jackson Diehl, who was in South America and Katharine Graham arrived and he got her head-of-state interviews all over the continent and hairdressers and she was thrilled and Jackson Diehl went up through the ranks of the *Washington Post* and his career was solid. There was another guy in Kenya, who was the East Africa

correspondent, I think for *Newsweek*, and this may be an apocryphal story—it's what we call in journalism, "too good to check."

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: She showed up, and he didn't actually get it right. He packed her into a balloon. Have you ever been on a balloon safari? They're the most glorious things, you go up, and the next thing you know you're coursing above the Maasai Mara—you know, you're several hundred feet above the ground, and there are gazelles, and I don't know, tigers and lions—outdoor stuff. Trees. Grass. Whatever. I'm at two with nature. Like Woody Allen.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'd always thought that the book about *Jews in Nature* is probably quite short.

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: It's why the Old Testament is shorter than the New Testament. This poor bastard was floating above the savanna and Katharine Graham turned to him and said, "You know, I'm not here as a fucking tourist."

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We didn't have that bleep, you know.

DAVID REMNICK: End of career. Never heard from again. I mean, I think he became a recipe-checker. **(laughter)** So Katharine Graham was in Moscow and we didn't go to the interview. But I drove her to the hairdresser, and the next morning after the interview there were photographs of her and Gorbachev on the front pages of *Pravda*, and *Sovietsky* and *Izvestia*. Her hair looked *fantastic*.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You made history, as you say.

DAVID REMNICK: Exactly. And then I was deputized to take her to the city that was known at the time as Leningrad. And what do you do with Katharine Graham in Leningrad? You take her to the Hermitage, and she looks at the paintings with that kind of eye that you and I don't have, which is that she may well purchase **(laughter)** a Chagall, a Matisse.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I sometimes have the eye, that's about all.

DAVID REMNICK: And then at night we went to the Kirov, no problem. The only problem was that there was a second night. I had no idea. What do you do? Take her to a soccer game? No. *Drinking?* I thought I'll take her to the circus, it's a very intimate circus, lots of fun. Kids love it. Old people—they love this stuff! There is no head of state to interview in Leningrad. And we go to the circus and after forty-five minutes she is *bored to tears*. Clowns—they're great.

Suddenly she said in this kind of tone of voice and with the use of the subjective, some tense that normal people don't have—"I think I would rather go," or something like that. And "Okay, we'll go." And nets were being lowered over the arena and, which meant it was time for the wild cats and lions and so on, and I didn't think anything of it, and I went down the stairs and there was one of those babushki, you know, sort of stout women that you see guarding paintings and train stations and public urinals and so on. And she said in Russian, "*Nel'zya*." It's impossible, you can't go. And I said back in Russian, I hope using the proper accusative case, "You don't understand. This woman has a fatal disease. **(laughter)** We must leave." And she melted, butter-like, and we went down the stairs and we passed this kind of box, a kind of—with slats, about the size of a small coffin, and I passed by it, and Katharine Graham started to pass by it, and as she was passing by it a claw and *Roawr!*—missed Katharine Graham's rather shapely calf by about a quarter of an inch, and she sprinted to the waiting limousine and I thought this was it, I'm going to be checking recipes with the guy from Kenya for the rest of my life, **(laughter)** which is not bad work, really, when you consider an undergraduate degree in comparative literature.

(laughter) "Rice pudding . . . Rice pudding." **(laughter)** She got in the backseat of this limousine, and she said, "That was fantastic." And that was it.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Then, you tell the story deliciously and right when you finish this, you say to the reader . . .

DAVID REMNICK: I know nothing about this woman, nothing . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: . . . this gentle reader that I am reading you to prepare, while I am preparing for this evening tonight, you are probably writing two or three articles, you say, "This story of course, revealed nothing of Mrs. Graham."

DAVID REMNICK: This is true. This is what you discover, of course, if you have half a brain and any humility about journalism or life—that you don't know *anybody*. You barely know your wife or your husband or your brother, your sister, your parents, so this whole process of diving in—and needless to say, it's not the first time I've told that story and dined out on it for years and I knew nothing about this woman, and then years later this autobiography came out and, quite frankly, I thought it was going to be, you know, this sort of rich person piece of garbage vanity autobiography that we've read, or half-read, a million of. You know, Ford, or Carnegie, or with the exception of P. T. Barnum, and I read this book and it was fantastic.
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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because . . .

DAVID REMNICK: Well, she was utterly exposed. Her story was unbelievable. She was raised by these rather mad mother and fascinating father in a combination of neglect and ignorance. I think that she found out that she was half-Jewish in her freshman year at Smith. I mean, it's a very strange story, and she tells it *nakedly* and brilliantly, and worked really hard on it. It didn't feel like one of those autobiographies that's a sort of after-dinner speech sort of thing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And particularly the marital . . .

DAVID REMNICK: And her husband, she married one of these kind of great young things of Washington, Philip Graham, who was going to be the next Felix Frankfurter and maybe run the *Washington Post* and in fact he was mentally ill and committed suicide and humiliated her terribly in the process, although she loved him dearly, and she suddenly inherits the *Washington Post*, which she was not equipped for at all, seemingly, and she has one of these rare lives, that when called on to do the right thing, three or four times in her life, she did it. She hired Ben Bradlee. She published the Pentagon Papers along with the *New York Times*. By the way, the *Washington Post* wasn't even the best newspaper in *Washington* for a long time, and of course supported the Watergate reporters, Woodward and Bernstein and the rest of them, when they were utterly alone. Utterly alone. And I just thought it was an arresting story on its own, but also yet another instance of not knowing a thing about anybody.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We'll come back to what I might call your. . .is it a fascination, or a commitment to vulnerability? I think you're particularly interested in people who reveal a fissure or show a weakness or . . .

DAVID REMNICK: When we were talking on the phone, I said that you—you rightly pointed out that a lot of these pieces are about losing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And failure.

DAVID REMNICK: And failure. Life is *mostly* about losing. Life is a thrilling but corrosive process at many times and certainly, journalistically, especially when you're trying to write about people who are known, who are often surrounded by the armature, and the armor, of public relations and cliché and deflection and defense and that your only shot at anything revealing is in moments of departure, loss, and moments of quiet and apartness, the least typical thing in life is winning. Big wins. You know, that's what the press focuses on, very often, whether it's in politics or anything else. But not only is that an atypical experience, it's also—it's an opportunity for optimal cliché and bad reporting. A favorite instance of that in sports reporting is in 1956 the

Yankees were playing the World Series and Don Larson pitched the only perfect game ever thrown in the history of the World Series, and, needless to say, all the reporters, except one, went to the winners' locker room to interview Don Larson and nobody can remember a thing about anything he said except the brilliance on the field. My favorite columnist ever, Murray Kempton, who wrote for the *New York Post*, a different *New York Post*—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How was it different?

DAVID REMNICK: Well, it was a liberal afternoon paper when Murray Kempton wrote for it. And then *Newsday*. Went to the losers' locker room and he interviewed the losing pitcher, Sal Maglie, who had pitched only a five-hitter, which is a remarkable achievement on any day, and the piece was, by the standards of sports writing, a kind of classic, a kind of journalistic classic.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which is why in your book we do discover people like Al Gore, not to necessarily belabor this—

DAVID REMNICK: Or Tony Blair, in the midst of running last time, basically having discovered, like some of us, that the business of invading Iraq was actually a *disaster* and that he had to face the British public in an election tied to George Bush, which is not the most natural fit for him and the only way for him to win was to endure a kind of masochism campaign, in which he allowed himself to be beaten up as often as possible and as frequently as possible on television or any other means and he was quite revealing in that mode. I'm not so sure that in the midst of winning the first time around, in the furor of New Labor and all the rest, he would have been nearly as exposed.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And of course this culture, particularly this culture in this country, is very much about winning, and I've often thought that I should do a whole series on the notion of failure. Would you come?

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah, I'll be there. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because failure is transcontinental, and what appears as failure here I think is very different from what appears as failure maybe in some parts of Europe. Let's get to the last sentence—

DAVID REMNICK: That's why English sports writing is so wonderful, because they're always losing, and that's a much better subject.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I wonder, I also wonder, this might be a little indelicate, but is there some pleasure in seeing someone failing? A form of *schadenfreude*?

DAVID REMNICK: As the saying goes, England is the only country where they have *schadenfreude* for themselves. **(laughter)** Look, there is a predatory aspect of journalism that, as Janet Malcolm reminds us in the starkest and maybe in the fullblown-est of terms, if that's a word, there is a predatory aspect to journalism, even practiced with integrity and even a measure of delicacy. There is a measure of when you go to see Al Gore when he's still in the throes of suffering, or Mike Tyson, or Tony Blair, or any number of these people in this book or written by other people. You know what you're doing. You know perfectly well what you're doing. But with famous people, they also know what you're up to, and so the transaction is quite complicated.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tension.

DAVID REMNICK: Pardon me?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tension.

DAVID REMNICK: Tension, and a kind of "he knows that you know that she knows," this kind of odd back and forth. In *New Yorker* profile-writing, the great tradition, the dominant vein and tradition for profile-writing, is of people who are not necessarily famous, and great practitioners of this, and certainly the great exemplar of it is Joseph Mitchell and there the transaction is different, I would assume, with Olga the ticket-taker or even Joe Gould who was a

kind of modest Village celebrity of a kind. With famous people—famous people is a vulgarity—but you know, politicians, or people who are not seeing their first journalists by any stretch of the imagination.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And "The Translation Wars" was your attempt at that in some way.

DAVID REMNICK: Even by comparison, they had been around the block, too. And so I, and also they weren't guilty of anything, they hadn't—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Mistranslating.

DAVID REMNICK: That remains to be seen.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The last sentence from the Katharine Graham piece, fodder for thought, I think. "During Watergate, Katharine Graham was prepared not only to publish and support her reporters, but also to protect them by every means available to her. Her values as well as her courage seem increasingly endangered." Why?

DAVID REMNICK: Well, we don't have all night. That they *are* in danger is I think obvious and we're talking about all the media—television and newspapers and the rest. I think it was encouraging, at least to me, that this last round of Pulitzer Prizes included investigative pieces that showed real balls. There's no other word for it. The fact that the *New York Times*, despite Bush calling in the executives, published their pieces on NSA warrantless wiretapping or the *Washington Post* published pieces about secret prisons or, by the way, the *New Yorker* publishing Jane Mayer on all kinds of torture or Abu Ghraib and the rest, I think that it's absolutely necessary and maybe not as common as it ought to be. And for all the reasons that we know all too well that have become a kind of litany, but true, whether it's profit motives or consolidation of media, that this is not exactly common, this kind of enterprise.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The question most people I have spoken to, when I spoke to them about having you on stage today, asked me to ask you—no, the second most, the most will come at the very end—is, they want to know how you do it, David. How you manage to edit and report at the same time.

DAVID REMNICK: Because I don't—everybody has a cartoon of who they are. My cartoon is that the cartoon is ruthlessly efficient and any number of things like that. I *don't* write that much. I write a couple of pieces a year. This is a collection, it's the first book in seven or eight years. I just finished reading *New Grub Street* again, George Gissing's great nineteenth-century novel about the English literary scene and I thought it was kind of a wonderful potboiler about crazy ambition and venality in the literary world and the journalistic world, and then I went back and I read the preface, which I usually don't in Penguin Classics, because why bother? And it was announced to me that Gissing wrote this novel in two and a half months, at a rate of four thousand words a day. That, to me, is quite something. Or Trollope before marching off to be a postmaster wherever he was.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have models that wrote even faster than you do.

DAVID REMNICK: A. J. Liebling used to say that he could write better than anybody who wrote faster and faster than anybody who could write better. **(laughter)** I don't even think that applies. Look. It's not important. What's important is over time what gets written that's any good, which is rare, which may not include me at all as a part of the discussion.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But I'm wondering if the speed, which is legendary, and which might be a cartoon, and might all of those things but nevertheless the same year that you're writing "The Translation Wars," you're writing about Katrina. You know, when I look at this. . .

DAVID REMNICK: Also, by the way, there's another reason that I can write twice a year and get something else done, is that there's an amazing staff at the *New Yorker*, a group of editors who themselves are remarkably intelligent.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But they don't write your pieces—they edit you.

DAVID REMNICK: They sure do. And thank God for it. So Dorothy Wickenden or Henry Finder or Daniel Zalewski or Pam McCarthy or whoever it is, this is a remarkable bunch of people, and Bob Gottlieb I think used to say that all he did, the way he got what he got done, was that all he did was, I guess, it was the ballet, the *New Yorker*, and Knopf, or whatever it was that he—and I—it's basically the *New Yorker*, my family—my *family*, the *New Yorker*, and the occasional piece of writing. A lot of things go undone or unread or un-thought-about. That's the only way I know how to do it. That and not sleeping very much, which is uninteresting, sleep, don't you think?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But not sleeping is tiresome. **(laughter)** I mean, I just feel, I suffer from some mild forms of insomnia, and I just feel like, "Why do I always need to make the night present? Do I need to keep her company?"

DAVID REMNICK: Oh, yeah, you do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I do?

DAVID REMNICK: Who's "her" in this instance? Your wife, or the night?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The night.

DAVID REMNICK: Ah. I will ask no more.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Please ask.

DAVID REMNICK: No, go ahead.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm wondering if there are unintended consequences, though, to the speed with which you write, which have an effect on the *New Yorker*, as such, which is some criticism has been leveled that the magazine, which you're well aware of, that it has become—

DAVID REMNICK: Too political.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Maybe not too political, I think I was going to say too *topical*, and that in some way the speed at which articles are done, the fact that in some way some of the other journalists, reporters, and people who work at the magazine feel at times that—the—what Roger Angell says, that the leisurely way in which the magazine used to be run has changed partly because you—if I'm not mistaken, are the first, one of the first editors, there have only been five, four . . .

DAVID REMNICK: Five.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: . . . who write.

DAVID REMNICK: H. L. Mencken used to have a postcard, and every letter of complaint that came in to him—complaint or compliment or whatever it was—and the postcard used to say, "Dear Sir/Madam: You may be right." **(laughter)** However.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'll remember that. That's good.

DAVID REMNICK: I think that there probably are instances where I do everything wrong, here or there, but I know that the lead piece this week was eight months in the cooking. Was that enough? I don't know. Maybe it needed nine, or maybe it should have been in in seven. I don't know. Do I push sometimes? Yes. I do. Is that counterproductive sometimes? You'd have to ask the writers. Maybe it is. I can't plead guilty or innocent, because I'm not them.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Of course. And I don't mean to . . .

DAVID REMNICK: I do know, on the question of topicality, that we are living in a highly, highly politicized moment, and my time as being editor is not the nineties, in which we were talking about, a vulgarized version of this concept, but the end of history, and we were going to have a stock market of 40,000 and everything was going to be kind of positive millennial thinking, and that hasn't been the case in five years. It's been—if by speeding up the process of knowing more about the places we have to know more about, the politics we have to know more about, has had that effect to some degree, then I would plead guilty. But for the most part, overall, I think it's a good thing. It may be a difficult thing for some writers sometimes. But I hope they're getting the time they need to do it right and well.

What I don't want to see happen is for the magazine to become humorless or unliterary, because as much as I'm a believer in nonfiction and reporting and all the rest and that's been *my* life as a writer, however circumscribed as it is by time now, I also know that fiction can reach places that nonfiction never will, and so there will always be a place for fiction and significant space for fiction in the *New Yorker*. I also know that a magazine that—the stupidest thing—the fireable offense, one of many, I guess, but the immediate fireable offense that you could commit as the editor of the *New Yorker* would be to get rid of the cartoons, because it's what everybody reads first, and why not? Me too. And also the most difficult thing as an editor is not necessarily finding somebody to go to Sudan, it's finding something that's authentically funny. It's very, very hard. I remember taking Roger Angell to lunch after I'd been editor for about a year or so. Roger's now of a certain age and he's worked for every editor in the history of the magazine and I very earnestly laid this out to him, the difficulty of finding things that are really funny. He said, well that's very interesting, I've now heard that from Harold Ross, William Shawn, Bob Gottlieb, and Tina Brown.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: [Silence.]

DAVID REMNICK: I've stumped you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, no, you haven't really, not yet.

DAVID REMNICK: Not yet.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think we can talk a little bit about the relationship between fact and fiction and also how much value you put into objectivity.

DAVID REMNICK: You know. Objectivity. I don't think that's a word that—I don't even know what that means anymore. I know what fairness means. I know journalistically and I know what *I* mean by fact and fiction and this is an interesting topic. Remember I have to think about these in terms of the magazine. What Writer X does on his or her own in a *book*, under their name for a publisher, is their business, and if they want to justify the mixing of made-up stuff—let's call a spade a spade—with factual stuff, and call it, I don't know, factual magical realism, or call it Sam Greenberg if you will, and if they want to justify it for reasons of a postmodern notion of what's knowable and what's not knowable, blah blah blah, that's fine, but not in my house, and I'll tell you the reason why I'm a conservative about this. I'm a conservative about it because when you read Sy Hersh or Jane Mayer or George Packer or Philip Gourevitch or any of the sort of political reporting, I want you to be assured that it is factual in the terms that I mean it and in the ways that I think we all mean it, which is that it is factual in so far as we could absolutely get to the bottom of the facts, whether through the reporting or the fact-checking and all the rest. Once you start putting in conflations and made-up dialogue because it helps the thing along, etcetera, I'm sorry, you do that on your own time, you do that somewhere else, and I might read it, but to me that's *fiction*. It's an interesting fiction. It's the use of fact in fiction, but to me for the purposes of the *New Yorker* and the way the categories have to be kept straight, if that's conservative thinking about it, fine, there's a lot of writers that I enjoy, even in the *New Yorker*'s distant past, that I suspect mixed things a bit. I don't think that's a tenable position in the *New Yorker*, at least while I'm around.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's interesting because this morning I had occasion to speak both with John Updike and Jeffrey Goldberger since they will be—

DAVID REMNICK: Goldberg.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Goldberg. Sorry, since they will be in conversation.

DAVID REMNICK: He changed the name, so you wouldn't know.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah, oh. He said Goldberger. No, Jeffrey Goldberg and John Updike and each one of them is a little nervous.

DAVID REMNICK: Maybe because they come from different realms.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah, different worlds. And one thing that Jeffrey Goldberg said to me today was that, I'm particularly interested in finding out from Updike, who just wrote this book called *Terrorist,* how he manages to do a book like this without going there, because I can only write about what I see.

DAVID REMNICK: Maybe it's—I haven't finished reading the book, but maybe it's like what Philip Larkin, when Philip Larkin was asked, "How do you know how to make the daffodil into a symbol of happiness?" Larkin paused and he said, "Genius. Genius." **(laughter)** My recollection is that—did Stephen Crane fight in the Civil War—did Stephen Crane fight in a war? I'm not quite sure that he did. I don't necessarily think that everything has to be a repository of direct experience. It helps.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But I think it will be an interesting tension there, because it's two different worlds—and it's two different worlds who will be talking about fact and fiction. And in some way, if you read the piece today in the *New York Times* . . .

DAVID REMNICK: By the way, John Updike started out as a "Talk of the Town" reporter for the *New Yorker*. He knows his way around a lot of different genres, not just writing fiction. He remains probably our most prolific critic, so he—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: He also wanted to know how you do it. Can you imagine?

DAVID REMNICK: The disingenuousness of that is fantastic.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: He said to me, "How does he write so quickly?" and I said, "Well, you're not too bad yourself, you're not chopped liver yourself."

(laughter)

DAVID REMNICK: This should cause a riot. John Updike is the author of *sixty* books. **(laughter)** *Sixty*. **(laughter)** Who is he kidding? And he plays golf, **(laughter)** which takes *hours*, apparently. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When I was writing my dissertation at Princeton, because as I told you, I got a Ph.D.

DAVID REMNICK: I've heard that.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which my father quickly pronounced saying Phhhh-d. **(laughter)** Sixty books. I remember my dissertation advisor when I was having some trouble for ten years, **(laughter)** said to me, "You know, Paul, there are two kinds of dissertations. Brilliant dissertations and *finished* dissertations." I went for the brilliant. And you can read my dissertation and if you're not asleep by page 12 you get a full refund. So how do you actually choose your subjects, and how do you prepare to write these profiles, I'm thinking particularly Tony Blair would be a very good example of that. How do you go about that?

DAVID REMNICK: You asked about the editing. First of all, editing and writing are activities that—John Cheever gave an interview, I think it was in the *Paris Review*, and he was asked to compare writing novels to writing short stories and he said "They're about as similar as

swimming and shooting a gun." Odd metaphors. But editing and writing. They're joined at one place, somehow, like a figure eight, I mean they do involve language, but writing is kind of a solitary activity and editing is actually *not*. Editing is this, but it's also, especially for someone who's in charge of the whole shebang and has to deal with people, are very—at least the way I do it, I hope—a fairly gregarious activity or at least in part it is. You know, I have to, first of all, you want to stay away from anybody else's territory. And if I have a piece in mind, and again, we're talking about a couple of things a year, maximum, and suddenly a writer comes in and says, I want to do such-and-such it is, "After you, Gaston," and then you come up with something else in the back of your mind and then maybe you do it, and maybe you don't, and there's that process.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But I'm interested, I guess what I'm after is—

DAVID REMNICK: No, I get the question, and I'll get to it. I'm never going to write in terms of foreign politics about South America, China, all the many places in the world that are not this little patch of business in the Middle East and Russia because I don't know anything about them. I'd love to read about them, but it's hard enough for me to keep up with those two places as it is. So, you know, I'm forty-seven now, and I'm suddenly going to become a China expert? I'd love to go, and going for the *New Yorker* is a great way to go, because they pay your ticket and no matter what foolishness you write, the editor will let it in, **(laughter)** and but so that narrows it, geographically it's narrowed, and what Mitchell did, I forget about the quality of it, the business of writing about Mr. Hunter's—that's just not what I'm equipped to do, or I can't see my way—Mark Singer can do that. Mark Singer can write a brilliant profile of four brothers who are doormen in New York, which he did, the Brennan brothers. My mind, there's a real poverty there, I guess, I just don't know how to do that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So how do you prepare for these interviews and these profiles?

DAVID REMNICK: Read everything, and the interview is not that important. *Showing up* is important. Showing up and showing up and showing up. The worst, most overrated form, of any kind of journalism is head-of-state interviews. They yield *nothing*, and I don't mean just George

Bush. Even Bill Clinton, as protean an intelligence as he is, he goes into that interview as head of state and he is prepared. He knows what he is not going to say and if he slips off of that preparation, it's an international incident, he's very aware of that. And so these things that journalists crave—get an interview with Bush or Gorbachev. As it turns out the Gorbachev interview in Moscow—what was the lead to it? It was incredible what a false kipper was thrown to the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek*: the idea that there would be a joint Mars project between the United States and the Soviet Union. That *led* the paper, after all this *geshrei* about an interview with him. For somebody like Blair, there are five biographies to read, and you read them so you know what's already covered ground. You don't want to go into a Blair interview and say, "Are there any intellectual influences that you have?" I mean, you've got limited time, you'd better know that his main intellectual influence was a Christian theologian, and he was at Oxford, and so on, and you have to know this and then get to the next level of detail, otherwise you've just wasted ten minutes. That's the down side of interviewing anybody famous—your time is limited, and you're not always able to show up and show up and show up. I mean, that's one way of preparing—there's many others.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Why—I mean, when I called you and you famously told me now that you are the editor of the *New Yorker*.

DAVID REMNICK: I didn't mean it to be obnoxious.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, I just felt, I know why you get a lot of things done. I was thinking, why is it that you don't write about yourself.

DAVID REMNICK: Very good question. I only do it very—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is that the first good question I've asked?

DAVID REMNICK: No.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's the first time you say it, and I've been waiting, **(laughter)** and I put all this effort in.

DAVID REMNICK: Oh, this is not a psychoanalytic session.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We're nearly done.

DAVID REMNICK: I asked myself that, and it's—when I read it in others, people who do it well, I admire it enormously, and if and when I try to do it, it feels like vanity. And this is a failing of a journalistic background, I suppose. I mean, life is not quite done with me yet in these regards, and we'll see. The last thing anybody wants is another memoir about editing. It feels like orthodonture. It's a failing, it's—I've never done it, because I've never done it well, so therefore never published it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You've tried?

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah, sure. It's not as if I'm allergic to what newspaper reporters kind of allergically call the vertical pronoun. I don't mind using it if it furthers the thing along, but you haven't gotten from me other than kind of charming anecdote, I hope, in the course of some of these pieces about the tiger story and Katharine Graham, or Mike Tyson's attempt to eat me alive—that's not, that's just . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: He failed, he failed.

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah, he failed at a lot else.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So, this book, *Reporting*, which has on its cover, in the background, the article you wrote about Katrina, it follows a long tradition, I suppose, of self-anthologizing, editing oneself, and maybe editing out some things that could have been included, might have been included, should have been included, may be included in the second edition.

DAVID REMNICK: Well, there's lots that's not included. There's no opinion writing in there and I also—which I'm not very good at for a variety of reasons that we'll talk about, and so I could be wrong, which we'll talk about. Also there are pieces that are what I call knock-knock stories that are not in there. They're a kind of, there are a few pieces, one goes to Turkey at a time when there is about to be an Islamist government, and you don't really have a core story, but you go knock-knock, knock-knock and you talk to the foreign minister and the dissident novelist Orhan Pamuk, and you go to see the human-rights community and what about the Turks and the Armenians—blah, blah, blah, blah—and if you have any craft at all you can make this into what is commonly called in journalism a situationer, and maybe it goes down well with a glass of milk, or maybe it doesn't, but it's certainly—look. This is what Anthony Lane when he published a much better book called—a wonderful title—called *Nobody's Perfect*—referred in his preface to the book as, "You are holding in your hands a gigantic hunk of old journalism." With Anthony it's modesty, with me it's Socialist Realism. **(laughter)** And those kind of pieces, though, don't even make that grade.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: One question, which I think many people will want to hear you comment on, is the piece that could have been included in one form or another and certainly, since many of your pieces in this book have updates to them—you update a piece you wrote a few years ago, you tell us what has happened since then, even in the Graham piece, there's an update to her passing away, as it were. There's the piece that you wrote about a month before the war in Iraq and I'd like to, because a lot of people may not have it memorized.

DAVID REMNICK: I do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, for the benefit of everybody but you.

DAVID REMNICK: That's for sure.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I will read the last two paragraphs quite quickly but clearly. "The United States has been wrong politically and morally about Iraq more than once in the past.

Washington has supported Saddam against Iran and overlooked some of his bloodiest adventures. The price of being wrong yet again would be incalculable. History will not easily excuse us if by deciding not to decide we defer a reckoning with an aggressive totalitarian leader who intends not only to develop weapons of mass destruction, but also to use them. Saddam's abdication, or a military coup, would be a godsend. His sudden conversion to the wisdom of disarmament almost as good. It is a fine thing to dream, but, assuming such dreams are not realized, a return to a hollow pursuit of containment will be the most dangerous option of all." And this you signed and it's in the issue of February 3, 2003, in the *New Yorker.*

DAVID REMNICK: The glaring wrong thing is—and I was hardly alone—is that WMD was not only used there, and thought to be present. It obviously was not. *Now* there has been a lot of very good journalism on why not and this is, you know, a disastrous, a disastrous aspect of American foreign policy that has led us down this road that we know all too well about. Why did I feel the way I did about Iraq has nothing to do with 9/11. It certainly had nothing to do with some great affection for the Bush administration, which I and the magazine had criticized many times and pretty vociferously on covers and comments and pieces and all the rest, even before the war, but at that time one had seen that Saddam Hussein had used, as we know, chemical weapons against Iran. It had invaded and occupied and intended to keep another country—Kuwait—might not love Kuwait, but there it is. And it had used chemical weapons in killing thousands of its own people—Kurds—in the north, and, as we know now, also Saddam Hussein crazily—there's a long piece in *Foreign Affairs* this, I guess, quarter—wanted his own people to believe that he still had this stuff for reasons of power, for reasons of holding power, of intimidation, of what a totalitarian leader does. But the fact of the matter is that, at least at that time, in the months preceding the invasion, and certainly thereafter, all these things were absent. For whatever reason, history will tell us, but they were absent, and absent WMD, and absent a threat to neighbors or anyone else, the other rationales for war were not even remotely, to me, worthy of invasion. Now, criticism of the Bush administration has come from me, from other quarters, either more vociferously or less so in the magazine, over and over and over again, and not just about the conduct of the war and not just about torture and all the more obvious things that have happened since. But if you ask about what my motives are, I am not just a kid of the Vietnam era.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Your motives, yes, why did you leave it out of the collection?

DAVID REMNICK: Because there are no opinion pieces, there are no comments. I've written forty of them. It's hiding in plain sight, it's not like it's never mentioned, it's not a secret, and it's not as if I wouldn't talk about it right now in public or any other time. There's dozens and dozens and dozens of pieces that are not in this book. But I'm not just a child of Vietnam, I'm also someone who has grown up and watched us delay and delay and delay a reckoning with Bosnia, and again, they're not necessarily absolutely analogous, but in terms of intervention and the use of intervention, I am not an isolationist, and I saw as we all did the absence of intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo, or waiting far too long, leading to countless deaths. The complete absence of intervention in Rwanda leading to an incredible genocide, and that certainly shaped my thinking. Again, you can completely argue and probably be right that the analogy with Iraq is not only imperfect, but far worse than that.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you have regrets?

DAVID REMNICK: How could you not? How could you not? All I'm telling you is that the circumstances—journalism or opinion is written in a moment of time.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How do you think that you, David Remnick, were fooled?

DAVID REMNICK: Like we were—look, there were a lot of people who were against the war and they were right. But I wasn't alone. There were people that I admire far more than the leaders—the heads of state—who were also, for these reasons, and in quite reluctant rhetoric . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's reluctant rhetoric, but it seems that what convinced you in part was a book you read about the situation.

DAVID REMNICK: No, no, not at all, the Kenneth Pollack book, no. But certainly by listening to what people like Adam Michnik or Václav Havel had to say about this, who to me are not bloody-minded conservative radicals, had a large influence on me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you think Bush lied to the country?

DAVID REMNICK: Sure. If lying means the improper use of intelligence.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think that's one definition.

DAVID REMNICK: If lying includes the selective use of intelligence and what Sy Hersh has memorably called "stovepiping" of intelligence so that it moves up through a process unquestioned and unchallenged, then, yes, I do, and we've written this countless times, including myself, but again, if you ask me, is that conclusion wrong? Absolutely. And there were people at the magazine who certainly argued that, and who wrote it at the time, Hendrik Hertzberg.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But obviously your voice carries more weight.

DAVID REMNICK: I don't know, I mean, I don't think that *my* voice—I don't know how changed minds work in terms of editorials or comments or like that. I can't speak to that. Well, I've answered the question.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I've recently read the *London Review of Books* piece about AIPAC.

DAVID REMNICK: Dear God. The Jews again!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The Jews again.

DAVID REMNICK: Oh, you wanted me to react to the piece and not just have a theatrical performance?

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, I was giving you a moment, because you haven't stopped talking, so I figured I'd just let you collect yourself after this question that you have probably been asked about Iraq.

DAVID REMNICK: Yeah, more than once. Yeah, but about AIPAC? Look, I think that piece was useful in that it aroused a conversation about a legitimate subject—about the influence of a lobbying group. Do I think it's a Masonic lodge influencing the however limited brain of a President and Vice President? I kind of doubt that. I kind of doubt that. I also think AIPAC is infinitely more conservative than even American Jewish opinion, where it comes to Israel, and is *infinitely* more conservative than Israeli public opinion on its own self. Israeli public opinion at this point, ranging from the left to the center right is pro a Palestinian state, at long last, and AIPAC, so far as I can tell, is not. But that said, I think the portrayal of it in that piece, as I read that piece, without having done any independent research and just knowing a bit about it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Did the *New Yorker* cover that story?

DAVID REMNICK: No, we didn't. I don't think we can be accused of underreporting or underwriting about . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Israel—

DAVID REMNICK: . . . Israel, Palestine, the Middle East, South Asia, etcetera.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you think that there are some countries the *New Yorker* should report on that—

DAVID REMNICK: Sure. Yesterday I was in Toronto and a man in the back said, is the *New Yorker* interested in Canada and Canadian politics?

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I was just about to ask you. I was just about to ask you.

DAVID REMNICK: It would be rude to say "no." But it's really rude to lie and so I said, "somewhat." What am I supposed to say? I mean, the most interesting thing that I discovered in Toronto yesterday is that Art Spiegelman's piece in *Harper's*, which includes the Danish cartoons, has been taken off the stands in the biggest—did you even know this, Art?—in the biggest book chain called Indigo, which is I think by scale kind of like Barnes and Noble. I didn't learn much, I was mostly yammering. You remember Michael Kinsley had a contest of the most boring headline of all times—and people would send in the worst headlines and the dullest headlines and there was a headline over a Flora Lewis op-ed piece in the *New York Times* and it was called "Some Worthwhile Canadian Initiatives." **(laughter)** I have to say, that did not get a huge laugh last night. I kid the Canadian people, but I love them, I love them, I really do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Somewhat.

DAVID REMNICK: Somewhat.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Funny you should mention Michael Kinsley, because he will be moderating a conversation we'll have here in about a month's time on *Slate* as they celebrate their tenth anniversary, and I just was wondering what the initiative at the *New Yorker* is with its Web presence and how involved you are or how important you think it is.

DAVID REMNICK: I think it's very important . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Are you somewhat interested, or . . .

DAVID REMNICK: . . . but the way we've approached it reminds me—there's a haiku by the long-ago Japanese poet Basho and it goes like this: "Oh ant climb up Mount Fuji, but slowly, slowly." That's been our Web strategy. **(laughter)** And I think what happened is— the *New Yorker* is quite independent. I have zero—you'll have to take my word for this—*zero* editorial interference in the *New Yorker* from the ownership of the *New Yorker* and I have had probably—we talk about all kinds of things but I have never had, and you'll have to trust me on this, it's hard to believe, but it just doesn't happen. On the other hand, to start a new business, which is what the Web is, it's probably a good idea to bring it up with your master, no matter how indulgent.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And business has been good at the *New Yorker* under your leadership.

DAVID REMNICK: Yes, yes. Thank God. Which allows us to do what we do. I don't wake up in the morning thinking, "Oh, we're going to line somebody's pockets," what I'm thinking of is that we are going to be able to do what we do and pay our contributors decently and well and everybody can make a living and we can go on buying stories from Alice Munro or getting armored cars in Iraq to cover that war and all the things that we should be doing, and cartoons and all the rest, but to start something new, you do have to approach the ownership and I think they were quite rightly conservative about the web, because they looked around, and they saw Time/Life, for example, with their initiative years ago called Pathfinder, was one of them, lost tens of millions of dollars, and I think, and I'm gleaning some of this, it's not all explicitly stated. The ownership of the *New Yorker* and Conde Nast said, "You know what? Let's not be pioneers in this business," and especially on magazines, where it was not so obvious. I don't think magazines are in an existential crisis, the way newspapers are, we might be someday, and we would be *absolute fools* to ignore this technology and the possibility and the reality that younger readers are going to migrate, some of them at least, toward reading it on a screen as opposed to reading it—so far, the best technology to read the *New Yorker* is this thing that you get in the mail. That may change. The first step was to do nothing, to be honest, and now we do something. We have a website that is quite good, but it has its modesties, its limitations, and I would expect next year that it will be vastly deepened, improved, and widened, and all the rest, meaning

archives, meaning a lot of web-only material. Reasons, in effect, to go to it every day as opposed to once in a blue moon.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I feel that way, in some way—

DAVID REMNICK: And, excuse me, without undermining the principles of the magazine, the core of the magazine, and its reporting, and all the rest. Sorry.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I feel the same way with these kinds of events is that, however much we live our lives virtually, people want to see the real McCoy, whoever McCoy may have been, and there is some debate about that.

DAVID REMNICK: Well, this is also a question of how to promote the magazine, because we do live in this commercial world, and things need to be promoted, and somebody on our staff, Rhonda Sherman, had a brilliant idea to have an arts festival, a weekend-long festival called the *New Yorker* Festival, which has now been running for years. But it's not P. T. Barnum. It is a night of fiction readings and there are panels about all kinds of subjects that we would do in the magazine, conducted by our writers or subjects, and all kinds of events like that, to me that felt completely right. So if it's going to be, as they say in the business, a brand extension, whether it's books that we publish or coffee mugs, it better be a damn good coffee mug, or an arts festival, or a website.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In your view, to conclude and then conclude our session, since you asked me how long these things last and I always say more or less as long as a psychoanalytical session, and I feel we've gone over a bit—

DAVID REMNICK: Is there an extra charge?

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: —but I won't charge extra. Your ideal issue for a *New Yorker*, what might it be? And, also, since you mentioned humor, I am thinking there are some people who used to do cartoons for you or who used to work—I'm thinking of Art Spiegelman—or others who we might want to see back in the pages.

DAVID REMNICK: Art was—Art is—a brilliant, probably has created some of the most memorable covers of the *New Yorker* in the history of the magazine, that's hardly his only achievement, and his reaction for us on the Danish cartoon controversy some months ago was to do this fantastically exaggerated anti-Semitic cartoon as if there had been a contest, which you had to be there, it was very funny. So what is an ideal issue? I don't know. It could be any number of things. If there were a novella that I thought were—for example, I just read "Everyman," the Philip Roth novella, if that had been available to us, alas it was not, I would have loved it a lot, and we would have published it straight through, but not everything is available to you at any given moment. And the cliché of magazine editing and talking about magazines is it's a kind of meal, or there's a mix, and it is true, and I was looking at a book about the *New Yorker* by Ben Yagoda the other night and in Shawn's very whispery scrawl, you know the way kids will put Lou Gehrig at first base and you know, somebody from another team at second, these kind of fantasy teams of great baseball nines, I know you're a huge fan.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm lost now, completely. But it was a ball, it's a ball, a ball.

DAVID REMNICK: Bear with me. That he would also do these kind of ideal issues, and I have to plead guilty to doing this once in a while, and sometimes a hilarious profile will go fantastically well with a deeply reported piece from some horrific place and this kind of short—but it doesn't always work out that way. It's a weekly magazine and the capacity to have one issue that is kind of the beau ideal is—you're always, and the fault is probably *mine* more than anything else, you're always falling short of these Platonic ideals, and then you come back next week and you give it another shot.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Cartoon ideal?

DAVID REMNICK: I think—there's a cartoon editor named Bob Mankoff, and he runs something called the Cartoon Bank, and amazingly enough the cartoon that seems to sell most often is a cartoon by Bob Mankoff—how do you think that happened? It's amazing.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It would make a good "Talk of the Town."

DAVID REMNICK: An exposé of our cartoon editor. And the cartoon is of the man with the telephone saying, "Thursday's out. How is never? Is never good for you?" It's not a bad start.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I feel that way so often. Thank you very much.

DAVID REMNICK: Thank you.

(applause)

DAVID REMNICK: They're all rushing to the Yankee game.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I know, I know, they're all going to the game.

DAVID REMNICK: The Yankee game is in Bryant Park. It's amazing that they could fit it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: David wanted to go there instead of being here. Before signing some three hundred books out there, David Remnick has agreed to take a few questions. Might I add—there are two mics there, and in my experience, over the years, I've discovered that questions can be asked in about—unlike my own—in about fifty-four seconds, so questions, rather than statements, if you would.

Q: I wanted to thank you for your incredible discussion, but thought that I would feel unsatisfied if, given many of the themes that you talked about, specifically around failure, if you could talk a little bit about one that is perhaps revealing of you, and although sometimes tonight—

DAVID REMNICK: My own failures? Haven't we had enough of that?

Q: But one that's a little more personal. In your own incredibly intelligent way you've avoided a lot of that through some amazing stories, but to really to get into something that is revealing of yourself and your own vulnerability.

DAVID REMNICK: Where I've written a terrible piece?

Q: In a much more human sense.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Anything terrible.

Q: It's not so much a matter, and perhaps our host can perhaps push this.

DAVID REMNICK: That's going to be a longer answer than the Allman Brothers' version of "Mountain Jam." I don't—

Q: This is you avoiding. You understand what I meant.

DAVID REMNICK: You don't want to hear.

Q: I think we do.

DAVID REMNICK: *You* do.

DAVID REMNICK: Next.

Q: My question is regarding journalism. I have a niece who is in college and is exploring the idea of going into newspaper reporting.

DAVID REMNICK: Tell her there's a great newspaper called Goldman Sachs she should join. **(laughter)** It's fantastic. Starting salary is $550,000. She'll support you for the rest of your life.

Q: That job is filled, but if she was going to go into that, is there anything, hints that you might have, should she specialize in something? Should she be a generalist? Should she study some other subject altogether and then write on that?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Comparative literature.

DAVID REMNICK: She should know something. I'm being very serious, not facetious. She should actually not study journalism as an undergraduate, but should learn something about history or science or anything that's real. Most of journalism in terms of newspaper craft is a little bit like the way a seal can bounce a ball on its nose. Once you can do it, you can do it. Writing quickly. Inverted pyramid. I think journalism is also a temperament. It's a temperament of persistence, and showing up, and being able to weather slight and not so slight humiliations. It's not all going to see fancy people and you're ushered into the anteroom of the president of wherever. It's going to Cleveland, and the plane is two hours late, and the person you came to interview is not there, and they thought the interview was next week, and then you get there, and they're really boring. And that's a lot of what it's about. It's not sitting up here at the Library and being honored by talking to Paul or having people come out to hear you. It's that. It's this kind of slightly—

I'll give you an instance of it. Sy Hersh was drafted—Sy Hersh would go on and off the staff of the *New York Times* because they would temperamentally—they would fight. Sy's kind of mulishly independent-minded and he would give them his time and then he would go off and write a book and come back on. They were getting killed on Watergate, killed by Woodward and Bernstein, and some of these editors were not that enthusiastic to bring Sy on because he was so independent. They hired Sy and one day in the course of the Watergate, which was a story of

course that went on for many, many months, years, Sy Hersh needed to do a story involving Charles Colson, Chuck Colson, who was a Watergate perpetrator, and now a famous religious leader. **(laughter)** Amazing, isn't it? And somebody sitting next to Sy Hersh told me this story. That Sy got in at 8:30, which is in journalism a little like getting in at 4:00 in the morning. In the newspaper world, the day begins a little later. He started dialing—and phones used to have *dials* in 1974—dialing Chuck Colson's home number over and over again at intervals of 30 seconds until 6:30 in the evening. You don't need to have studied comparative literature at Princeton University, or auto mechanics, or anything—you just need to be a little crazy—and finally got him on the phone at 6:30 and got the story that nobody else got. And that kind of . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Nudnik.

DAVID REMNICK: Nudnik persistence. **(laughter)** See if she'll dial the phone over and over again. Then you'll know.

Q: I also want to thank you for coming to speak and also want to ask a little bit of advice in the disguise of a question. How do you, when you're interviewing a subject or researching a profile, how do you reconcile what I think is a sincere humility with the kind of ego necessary to ask really personal questions?

DAVID REMNICK: You do what works. You do what works. It's not—A .J. Liebling used to begin interviews by doing this. [silence] Rather like an orthodox psychoanalyst. I see this in myself and when I go to report and interview people and it's not something I'm proud of, it's a little embarrassing to make this admission in front of one person, as I recently did, much less a diminishing, but somewhat full, auditorium. **(laughter)** I become some other version of myself so as to fit the situation. If that person needs a loquacious interlocutor, I become that, if I sense that. If you need to stand back and be quiet, I do that. I think every reporter has had the experience, if you use a tape recorder, of doing an interview, and you come back, and you want to jump out a window because you've talked too damn much. And you learn from that. You may learn nothing else from a tape recorder, but you learn from that, and I become this other thing and if need be, and it may not even be pretty, and I think what Janet Malcolm describes in "The

Journalist and the Murderer" is a very very very heightened form of these kinds of transactions, and it's an interesting topic, but, again, I think it was quite particular to her and also to the whole McGinniss / MacDonald dynamic if you remember this piece in the book, but it's a very strange thing, and it comes with time and experience and mistakes, and, as Tony Soprano would say, it's like anything else.

Q: I was reading *Lenin's Tomb* this morning.

DAVID REMNICK: God love you. Did you pay retail?

Q: Actually I got it for free from Knopf. But I was wondering about, but I was also comparing the pieces between "Deep in the Forest" and "In Exile." How do you view the transition between the two works, from the piece about Lenin's Tomb in *Lenin's Tomb*, to the pieces of Russia in *Reporting*. What do you think has changed? How do you think it has changed?

DAVID REMNICK: How have things changed in Russia?

Q: Yeah, I know that's a cheap question.

DAVID REMNICK: Well, any foreign-correspondent book is a function of precisely when you were there, and the prevailing mood can't help but invade and infect your own spirit and sense of prospect for that place. I left, in terms of living there, when I left Moscow, there were literally fireworks in the air, and not because I was leaving. It was because this construct, guilty of what it was guilty of, historically, had, for reasons complex and strange and well-known by now, had collapsed. And a flag literally went down over the Kremlin on Christmas night. I mean, it was just absurdly romantic and finally deceptive. And so this book, *Lenin's Tomb* which was, reporting was kind of completed for the most part by the end of 1991 into 1992, is imbued with that sense of promise and maybe romanticism, and in some cases overestimation of people that went bad. Yeltsin is a good example. By the mid-nineties, Yeltsin had turned into a perpetrator of the Chechnyan war and all kinds of other things, like allowing the biggest crazy property grab in world history when that needn't be—things you all know. So the mood of these things

changed, the prospects change. The president of the country is not metaphorically a KGB colonel, he's *really* a KGB colonel, and there *was* a relatively free press and now there *isn't*. There were nascent opposition parties and now there aren't. So in many ways, unless you really like fancy restaurants, things are worse in some ways than years ago.

Q: Have you ever thought about doing a follow-up to the *Tomb*?

DAVID REMNICK: I wouldn't, because I live here and 98 percent of what I do is the *New Yorker,* edit the *New Yorker,* we've been talking about this writing business for quite a while, but I swear to you that's what I'm doing.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's take one last question very quickly.

Q: I think that you skipped over or were allowed to skip over an important word, which is "objective." Just say a little bit more about objectively, what that is?

DAVID REMNICK: Objectivity was in journalism a word years back that you would hear in newsrooms, and I think it supposed a kind of knowability, disinterest, and authority that I don't think anybody believes in anymore. I think what people strive for now, and should strive for, is real fairness. Not as described as on Fox and its rubric, but some sense of balance, some sense that you reflexively, if you try to get some sense of an entire debate, and not just one side of it. Now, there's also—that can go wrong, too, and I think Al Gore is quite right in saying there's this kind of false balance about something like global warming. There is no science saying that global warming is not a terribly dangerous process. There's no real science on it, there's fake science, but there is something called "fairness," and I think that is an ideal and that is a principle that is actually approachable and practicable and objectivity is something that, where I'm concerned, as I understood it in my starting-out days, is not really something that you hear much about, and I think for good reason.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, with this aspirational motto as the end, I would like to thank you for coming and David Remnick for being here.

DAVID REMNICK: Thank you very much.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There will be a book signing now!