

*Patrick Fine:* Welcome! I'm Patrick Fine, CEO of FHI 360, and you've tuned in to *A Deeper Look* podcast. Thanks for joining us. This is the final episode in our series this year, where we've looked at humanitarian crises and emergency response. Today, I'm very pleased to welcome Ambassador Rick Barton as our guest. Ambassador Barton is one of America's great humanitarians. He brings experience from the local, from the national and from the international level, and he is the ideal person to help us wrap up this season's Deeper Look at Humanitarian Crises and Emergency Response.

*Rick Barton:* Thank you, Patrick. It's really a pleasure to be here.

*Patrick Fine:* Rick is currently the co-director of the Scholars in the Nation's Service Initiative at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School, where he's been teaching since 2001. Is that right?

*Rick Barton:* Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* And he's also the author of a new book called *Peace Works*. And, I'm going to be asking him about his book in a minute because it's so relevant to our topic. Rick has tremendous experience working on peacebuilding, on conflict resolution and on humanitarian response. He is the founding director of the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) at USAID, which is really the U.S. government's first institutionalized effort to addressing humanitarian crises with a longer-term perspective and looking at that crisis-to-development continuum. And OTI under Rick's leadership made a name for itself as an agile, effective response mechanism, and it continues to this day to bear your stamp and to carry that reputation as a can-do organization.

You then went to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, where you were the deputy commissioner, so very senior position on the international stage dealing with humanitarian affairs. You were appointed as the Ambassador to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations during the Obama Administration. And then more recently, you were the Assistant Secretary of State for conflict and stabilization operations, so building a new bureau at the Department of State that was focused on humanitarian crises and emergency response and how the American government's responses could be more effective.

So, we really couldn't have a better person to help us sum up what is the state of the world with respect to humanitarian crises and emergency response. We started this year — our first episode was with Jana Mason who comes from UNHCR, and she gave us a big picture about where things stand in the world, how over the last five years, we've seen humanitarian crises become more protracted, of longer duration, that there were more people that were displaced than ever before in human history, even more than at the end of World War II, which was the previous reference point people were using. So, she painted the picture of the kind of challenges we face, and then she talked about some of the responses. Now, we're a year further on. How do you see the state of the world with respect to humanitarian crises and emergency response?

*Rick Barton:*

Well first off, thanks for having me here Patrick. It's great to meet you and to be on this podcast, so I really appreciate that. I ask the question actually in one of the first chapters in my book, *Is the World Going to Hell*, because there is this feeling that wherever you look something awful is happening and it seems to be closing in on us and it seems to be on a scale that we've never seen before. So, there's quite a bit of pessimism, but my conclusion is that actually we're not as badly off as we were in the last century, where 100 million people were killed by war. We're not even close to that, because we haven't had these two great world wars and hopefully we will not, as long as the U.S. and China get along, and climate change doesn't overwhelm us and somebody doesn't have an accidental moment with a nuclear weapon. So, the threats are real and they're there, but crises seem more intense and are more intense because we have many, many more people.

And the climate effects are bringing us back to great natural disasters. We're also seeing compounded disasters. So, they're not just natural disasters like an earthquake in Haiti followed by a hurricane not too much after it, but we also see the complete and total collapse of its government at the same time, partially because of the natural disaster but also because there has been deterioration for a long ...

*Patrick Fine:*

Just institutional weaknesses.

*Rick Barton:*

Yeah, just huge institutional weaknesses, and so, we're going to pay the price for a lot — for having cut corners on governance for the last several decades. We're paying the price for many more

people being around increased urbanization and then being reckless about climate. So, all of those things suggest that we could have again, we will continue to have, larger than ever natural disasters.

What happened from the early 1990s until a few years ago — the movement was into so-called complex emergencies, which were essentially conflict-driven or political deterioration. Up until that time, everything had been natural disasters. So, we went from 90 percent natural disasters to 90 percent complex emergencies. I suspect we're going to go back to 50-50 in the next few years, but that doesn't mean that there will be reduced suffering.

*Patrick Fine:* There could be increased suffering.

*Rick Barton:* Right.

*Patrick Fine:* Although it may be more balanced between natural disasters versus complex crises or manmade disasters. As you say, the intensity and the scale may be larger. Now, you pointed out three factors as drivers: one was population growth, second was climate change and the third is urbanization.

I'm actually happy to hear you list those three, because I agree with you, and I often point to those as underlying drivers of social change in the world, and I add one — technology. How do you see technology fitting in to both the creation of complex emergencies and also the response?

*Rick Barton:* And, I don't think we should leave out governance, because when you do have good governance, on the other hand these items that we've mentioned are making it more and more difficult to be a skilled leader and whatnot. Technology — I'm a congenial optimist, so I constantly look for hope because otherwise what's the point. And, I do think that's part of our job we're obviously privileged and we have an opportunity to give people a sense that things could get better. Technology for me is: We're still kind of figuring it out and particular to the communications technologies.

But, I think it has phenomenal potential to be almost a complete good, but being early generation users of these things, we're seeing abuses and misuses and the perversion of what could be a positive. It reminds me a little bit of the early days of television that basically most of the people who went into television were radio

people, so they didn't know anything about the visual side of it. They would go on and drop their voices an octave and they would think that they were using the medium, but in fact they had no idea of the potential of the medium. So, obviously the internet and cellphones — the ability for anybody anywhere to communicate with anybody anywhere in a moment for almost no cost — is a phenomenal breakthrough, which right now can be used by the Taliban as effectively as it can be used by the Afghan government, and I think, clearly, we're going to find more positive and constructive uses.

*Patrick Fine:* Yeah, I think it will come down on the technology side. There will be so much more information available than ever before that, on one hand, it can really facilitate planning and response, because you'll have this level of information that was never available before. On the other hand, it could also be used for more nefarious purposes to impede response, for example.

*Rick Barton:* Sure. And one of the things I talked about in the book and not at great length, because it's really not my subject, is that we're entering a period of mutually assured destruction. That phrase used to be saved for people in the nuclear weapons field, but now if you look at most of the threats, almost anybody can individualize them. So, a teenager in North Korea can probably knock out the computer system in a hospital in downtown Washington.

If people start doing that, anybody can reciprocate, and so you can end up with a series of nasty reciprocations. So, again at a time when we're sort of talking about the United States returning to a fortress mentality, the arguments for why we are actually more dependent on others are probably more compelling than ever, but it's going to have to be at a more sophisticated level.

*Patrick Fine:* You identify governance as one of the underlying factors driving complex emergencies. Can you say a little bit more about that?

*Rick Barton:* Sure, clearly if you don't have anybody in charge of a place or somebody is so self-centered in charge of a place that they're not able to reach out to the community quickly, the complexity of the problem just compounds itself. And, we've seen that, in places where there was no governance, that an earthquake can be absolutely devastating for years and years and years or in a place that has real governance problems, like Pakistan. When they faced

it, they very quickly realized they had one institution that was working fairly well — the military — for this kind of crisis.

*Patrick Fine:* Was that the floods?

*Rick Barton:* This is the earthquake in the north.

*Patrick Fine:* Oh, the earthquake in 2005.

*Rick Barton:* Something like that, but they also moved to cash, which was, so they gave people cash fairly quickly and that gave local people the opportunity to find their solution elsewhere in the country, if necessary, rather than being stuck there, being held almost in camps and whatnot.

So, if you have some form of governance, you're likely to reach a solution more quickly. Amartya Sen would talk about how countries that have any form of democracy are not likely to ever have suffered famine, because it would be so devastating to the popularly elected government, so they have to respond and they have to provide information. Well, those are the basic things that governments can do.

*Patrick Fine:* So, you're talking about accountability and then in the context of complex crises, you're talking specifically at the community level and the ability of community members to organize and to in some way be represented in a manner that is legitimate.

*Rick Barton:* And to receive that catalytic assistance from, if there is a national government or the international community. So, it's not precluded because they are so disadvantaged.

*Patrick Fine:* Right, they're not on their own.

*Rick Barton:* Right.

*Patrick Fine:* You are saying that that level of organization is one of the essential building blocks.

*Rick Barton:* I absolutely agree with that.

*Patrick Fine:* So, I want to ask you about your book. Your book is called *Peace Works: America's Unifying Role in a Turbulent World*. So, I think we can all agree that we live in a turbulent world, but I'd like to get

your perspective on America's unifying role, because I think few people would agree that America is playing a unifying role.

*Rick Barton:* Yeah, it is probably my favorite word in the whole title other than *Peace*, which for whatever reason gets a bad rap.

And, I've tested it on audiences. I said look, if I give you a choice between the word "peace" and the word "war," how many people prefer the word war? I've yet to have anybody raise their hand, but there's still something about it. There's an image problem around the word peace. But "unifying" is the aspirational word in this title and peace is plenty aspirational as well, for that matter. But, my argument is that the United States has an advantaged position. It doesn't mean we're better, that we're, it's God-given, but we have arrived at an advantaged position and most of the conversations on earth if we want to bring something to them we are invited to that conversation which nobody else can claim.

*Patrick Fine:* And we also have convening power that few others have.

*Rick Barton:* Absolutely, and then we actually have resources both in terms of talent and financial resources and others that we could actually direct constructively if we knew what to do. So, the book really makes the argument for "we've done it, so we can do it."

There are lots of opportunities for imagination, American ingenuity especially combined with native ingenuity, so that if we're not dependent on being the smartest guy in the room and always having the answer but being more catalytic, then the United States can really, can probably, make the world more peaceful. And, it's not a given we're going to have to work hard at it and we haven't been very skillful at it. So, if you look at America's interventions, it's been a real mixed record.

*Patrick Fine:* And when you say that, you're talking about our intervention since World War II or more recently?

*Rick Barton:* Well, the book really focuses on those that I know personally, so it really goes back to about 1994. So, it really picks up on Bosnia, Haiti, Rwanda as the early stories, but then you have to go through Afghanistan and Iraq and end up in Syria and other current places like Nigeria.

*Patrick Fine:* And now it's in the Sahel.

*Rick Barton:* So, there are plenty of places where the United States has tried to do things and we've stumbled an awful lot and there are many, many arguments. One of the core arguments that I hold on to is that if the American public is not engaged, it's difficult for all the smartest people in Washington and in our embassies and whatnot to always do the right things; it just doesn't happen. And, in the last 20 conflicts that the United States have been involved in, we haven't really had congressional action, which is sort of the preliminary step for the U.S. public to get a handle on what's going on. There's one really good example, and that is that when President Obama had sort of his famous redline speech, where he said the Assad regime has crossed that line.

*Patrick Fine:* By using chemical weapons in Syria.

*Rick Barton:* Exactly. When he made that speech, he then said, "But I will not act unless the Congress chooses to be part of this."

Which I thought was actually kind of a breakthrough decision, but it was ridiculed in Washington as he had given away some presidential power.

*Patrick Fine:* Right, that he was being weak and indecisive.

*Rick Barton:* Exactly. But what ended up happening is that that speech I think was on a Saturday. On Sunday afternoon, 80-plus congress people returned in a rush to Washington for a White House briefing on Syria. Now, you could probably guess that many of them had already prepared press releases condemning the White House for going ahead without consulting the Congress, so they had to destroy those and there they were actually engaged in a major decision that would affect the American public. Surveys of the American public showed that 15 percent self-described as following the events in Syria before that speech, 45 percent within two weeks were simply now engaged. So, that's our system.

*Patrick Fine:* Your point here is that for America to play a unifying role and to be more effective in its diplomacy, its use of soft power, that it really requires the engagement of the American people.

*Rick Barton:* Absolutely.

*Patrick Fine:* And that to be reflected by Congressional authorizations or Congressional engagement. So that makes perfect sense. But, if we now play that idea forward to today, where we see the U.S. more polarized, we see a society that's more divided, I think, than in our lifetimes, how do you see the application of that principle?

*Rick Barton:* So, there are a couple of quick tests for citizenship. One of them is obviously voting or caring about things, but another one would be paying taxes. So, we've gotten into a lot of wars in the last couple decades and we've never been told that we have to pay for it. There's never been a tax increase, there's never been any suggestion that there was a responsibility that went with it.

It used to be that people served in the military, and now very few of us have any direct family connections with the U.S. military.

If you're really not voting on these things and you're not paying taxes on them and it's not your children or your cousins who are serving in these conflicts, you start to see that we've kind of taken a pass. Now, I think we have to re-engage on each of those. So, there should be true costs. If somebody, instead of hiding \$100 billion expense in Afghanistan, it needs to be articulated, and it also needs to be articulated as to where that money is going. So, in the early days of the Syrian war, for example, we were spending almost all our money on humanitarian assistance. So, after about two years, we had spent about \$4 billion dollars on mostly humanitarian assistance. I'm not talking about the secret expenditures the intelligence community was spending.

But within a few weeks, when the U.S. military became engaged, we quickly doubled our spending and people just need to understand that when a U.S. soldier is in Afghanistan, it's about a million dollars a year as a loaded cost now. And, the loaded cost that Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes and other people have calculated ...

*Patrick Fine:* So, those are economists you're talking about.

*Rick Barton:* Yeah. They've calculated for the Iraq war, those are multi-trillion-dollar wars because they do figure on the cost of a veteran who has to go through years of rehabilitation, whatever it happens to be. Those are fair ways for us to understand things and they're not really beyond the ability of almost any American to understand if we are invited to the conversation. And, one of the arguments that I have against the national security establishment, of which I'm a

card-carrying member, is that we kind of suggest that the smartest people in the world are doing this work for you. It's like, I'm sorry it's not that complicated.

*Patrick Fine:* One of the things that I really like about your book is your emphasis on the need for humility and for the U.S. to play a positive role, that it has to be self-reflective and that it requires humility. I think you said that when you asked focus groups around the country what one word characterized the U.S., that the most common word was ...

*Rick Barton:* Arrogant.

*Patrick Fine:* Arrogant. And that would work against the kind of strategy that you're talking about. The other thing that really stood out for me in *Peace Works* is the emphasis on local solutions, so listening to the counterparts that we have and to the people who are caught up in humanitarian crises and finding the solutions there.

*Rick Barton:* Exactly. And at the very simplest level, you are arrogant if you see somebody else's problem and say, "No worries, I can solve your problem." How many times have we done that for somebody who loves us dearly and comes to us with a problem, and we try and we don't always hit a home run no matter the wisdom that we offer them? So, right from the beginning, that is a complex issue. I know it's troubled you a long time, so I'm going to be as thoughtful about this in particular listening to you and really trying to figure out what's going on with you and your country or your people at this point.

*Patrick Fine:* Yeah there's another kind of arrogance that I often see in international development, where somebody comes with an idea or solution to an experienced expert and they say, "No, that won't work, we tried that, tried that, that won't work." I call that old-fart syndrome.

*Rick Barton:* Yeah, one thing just to mention is I had the great opportunity at OTI and at CSO, the state department, to actually work in two offices or bureaus that when we walked in the room, we were not there because we had a geographic mandate (it's happening in your area and you have to do it), or because we had a predetermined product. Because, it turns out, every place on earth needs help with AIDS or needs help with food or food security; almost everybody has those problems. Our priority was we had to determine what

was most important. So, having that license was a wonderful license, and I believe that would also help people on other parts of the development and humanitarian field as well — not to always bring whatever they have in the warehouse.

*Patrick Fine:* Right, and you talk in your book about the importance of narrowing down to some specific focuses or priorities. How did you do that? Did you have a set methodology for doing that?

*Rick Barton:* It really was a methodology. Actually, we did sort of develop kind of a step methodology that, at every step, you could either stop on that step or you could keep going. But, that was another kind of license that we had is that we didn't have to be responsible for solving that problem if we thought we couldn't do it. And so, it was unusual to be able to send people out in the field for two to three weeks or longer and give them the license to come home and say "it's not the right time." Because otherwise, there's the expectation you have this five-person assessment team and they have to go out and say this is what we'll do. And that was Brian Atwood, who was the Administrator of AID, he gave me that license when I came back from Sarajevo and I was just developing the process that we were going to go through.

And at a critical point, he said to me, "So, do you think you might have gotten shot at while you were running at your hotel?" I said, "Yeah, that's why we ran into the hotel."

And he said, "What was the likelihood of the war returning to Sarajevo?" And I said, "I think there's a 10 percent chance that peace will hold." And he said, "I'd like you to be a post-bullet program." Well, guess what [*exhales*]? I breathed a big gigantic sigh of relief, because trying to do this work in the middle of bullets flying is a little bit overly optimistic.

*Patrick Fine:* Right and maybe that's one of the challenges that we continue to face in Afghanistan. The lesson there though is that sometimes we need to be willing and empowered to say it's not the right time to do something.

*Rick Barton:* Absolutely. And, we did that in Haiti in particular. It was really OTI's big breakthrough test pilot.

*Patrick Fine:* And, this was following the earthquake or before the earthquake.

*Rick Barton:* This was before the earthquake, following the U.S. invasion. So, we had the soldiers there in 1994. But, what we did is we came up with a model that said we will work on what we call local governance.

But, there was very little local governance. We had expected mayors would be elected, and of course, they were not. That was put off, so we had to work with whatever existed there. But, we said we will work with any community and any group in any community if they come up with a plan that is supported by the community. They can show it could be 12 farmers, it could be 27 parents. We didn't really care. Any kind of grouping would work. They're willing to make a contribution of their own. They're willing to be totally transparent with the assets that are being put into the project. And if they weren't willing to do that, no "I've got the idea all these people will listen to me, I'm in charge," we'd say there are 135 communes in this country and we'll just go to another one. So, the ability to say no really does empower you in a way that almost nothing else does. These are things that I think are useful and helpful rules.

*Patrick Fine:* Yeah, helpful not just in humanitarian crisis but just in international development work in general — to not feel the pressure that I've got to come up with some solution and to have self-confidence either as an organization or as an individual to say this isn't the right time for a solution.

*Rick Barton:* You know, I can remember, in particular, going back to Rwanda after the genocide. So, I was there immediately after the genocide, and I went in with the attitude of there's some things we can do. And actually, it was a Rwandan employee, a foreign service national at the Embassy, who had lost all his family. After my conversing with him for 15 minutes, he said, "Rick you have to understand who I've lost." And, he went through basically every kind of relative you can have and he said, "I'm just not prepared to even think about this."

*Patrick Fine:* The weight of that.

*Rick Barton:* And I thought, my goodness, who was I to imagine that he was going to be ready to okay let's just pick it up and get going the next day? So, I got back there about six or eight months later, and there had been some resistance, as you can understand, sometimes by the local AID mission. "Who is this guy coming in to tell us what to

do?” But, I did have the luxury of time to just drive around for a few days. And, then it turned out that the Jelts, who were there, they were the AID family.

*Patrick Fine:* I remember.

*Rick Barton:* They had given it a lot of thought. In particular, she had given it a lot of thought. And we sat down one night, and we realized that all of these transitions were going on in the post-genocide Rwanda. But, there was one dominant idea and that was that there were many more women and girls in the population than there were men. So, we thought, “Well, this Hutu-Tutsi thing has not worked out very well, and if we try to either paper it over, or overlie it, we're probably going to end up getting stuck again. So, why don't we focus on women in this post-genocide moment?” And then, it turned out there was a fortuitous occurrence, that there was a new ministry that was being run by the only woman in the cabinet and she had been the fundraiser for the rebel movement. So, she had standing. But, of course, they had given her the weakest bureaucracy with no money and no people, so we were able to go in there and work with her and really elevate her entire function and then use that as a way to reach women all over Rwanda. So, we got an answer, but again, a lot of times it's just plain fortuitous. But, if you're open to what is available, as opposed to what you want to have happen, you can still get to what you want to have happen.

*Patrick Fine:* Right and then there's also the ability to see where opportunities are. And, Rwanda is a good example, because you're talking about 1994, the devastation in the aftermath to the genocide there. And today, if you look at Rwanda, 50 percent of the cabinet is women. So, maybe it started with that seed back in 1994. It's an example of where peace really can work.

What are some other lessons that you've drawn from your experience that we can end this episode with? About what doesn't work? And, you've said arrogance doesn't work, you've said imposing solutions doesn't work, so those are a couple things that stand out. What are some of the lessons, what lessons can you share with us to wrap up this episode?

*Rick Barton:* I do think that the feeling that because of your advantaged, that you're necessarily smarter than the people. I find again, getting back to what you mentioned earlier, it's both a negative lesson and

a positive lesson, because anywhere you go in the world, there are people there who are really quite capable, even a place that's been devastated by genocide. There were still many, many people who were quite capable. And, they will own their problem forever, whereas you will visit their problem. Tourists' visas are just not the same as full ownership of whatever you have to go through. And, furthermore, they have ideas now. Now, if you also bring fresh ideas and stimulate their thinking, that's a great role for you.

So, I really, at the end of the day, I think we've talked about it already, but I would say respect the local initiative, seek out local ingenuity, empower it every way that you can and then recognize that yours is a catalytic role. It's not, "I only have one child, but I can't take that much credit for my child's good days and bad days. I wish I would have been more influential in sad times, but I'm really quite pleased that it is her life." And that's, I don't think that I care about anything more on earth, so that means that if I'm working in somebody else's country, they're probably, I'm not even that passionate about it as much as I care. So, let's really be honest with ourselves, and we can be helpful, and we need to be engaged because America does have this advantaged role. But, at the end of the day, these local people really are the ones that we want elevated in every way we can.

*Patrick Fine:* That is a great way to end this year's deeper look into humanitarian crisis and emergency response. I hope our listeners will take that perspective to heart. Ambassador Barton, I want to thank you very, very much for coming in and sharing your perspective with me and with our listeners and helping us finish the year on such a strong note.

*Rick Barton:* Thanks, Patrick. And, I look forward to your next year as well. I think it will be equally great.

*Patrick Fine:* So, next year we're going to be taking *A Deeper Look* into the darker side of development. And by that, what I'm talking about is looking at the paradoxes, the dilemmas, the unintended consequences, the efforts to do good that actually result in harm or that misfire in one way or another. And maybe, Ambassador Barton, we can get you back on to share some perspective on that.

I hope listeners will tune in next year for our theme that looks at the darker side of development. We're going to start out with Sarah Chayes, who is a specialist on corruption, has amazing experience

with looking at the impact of corruption on societies and, in particular, on development efforts.

As we end this episode, I want to thank all of the guests that joined me across the year with their wisdom, their knowledge and their experience.

I want to thank our listeners for tuning in and joining us. And, I want to thank our production team. So, Katherine Wise, who is the producer of *A Deeper Look* podcast; Leanne Gray, who is our photographer; and Alexia Lewnes, who is the head of communications at FHI 360, thank you very much for helping us take a deeper look at issues that matter.