

**JOHN WALDRON:** Hi everyone, and welcome to Talks at GS. I'm excited to be joined today by Clarissa Ward. Clarissa is CNN's Chief International Correspondent. For 15 years, Clarissa has covered war zones around the world for Fox, ABC, CBS, and now CNN. She's out with a fascinating new memoir called *On All Fronts: The Education of a Journalist*. Clarissa, thank you so much for joining us today.

**CLARISSA WARD:** Thank you so much for having me.

**JOHN WALDRON:** So let's just get into your early years, which are well described in the book. Your first job in journalism was working the overnight shift at Fox News. And again, you go into great detail about what that means. So maybe you'll elaborate on that in a second. And then you got this opportunity that no one else really wanted, which was your first posting internationally in Baghdad in 2005. You were, I think, 25 years old at the time. Just talk about that assignment, talk about those early days at Fox, and sort of how it shaped you.

**CLARISSA WARD:** Yeah. Well, first of all I would say let it never be said that I did not pay my dues, because there is no lower rung on the totem pole than the overnight assignment desk at Fox News. Okay? That is such a challenging shift to take on. You go into work at midnight. You leave at 9 am. The highlight of the day is, like, 3 am cheese fries arrive from the local diner. But it's also where you learn. It's baptism by fire. It's you're alone there at two in the morning and Saddam Hussein is found in a foxhole in northern Iraq and how do you respond to that? How is information disseminated? How do we corroborate reporting? How do we deploy teams in the field? That is the beating heart of any news organization, the newsroom. So, it's a great place to begin that education. And the book, as you know, is called *The Education of a Journalist*. It's not something that happens overnight. It's a long process that I'm still in the throes of.

And so, I learned a lot on the overnight assignment desk. But I knew I was desperate to be in the field. I just bugged my boss every single day, "Please let me go to Baghdad, please let me go to Baghdad, please let me go to Baghdad." And then finally, by the time I was 25 it was 2005, it was about two years after the invasion. And people didn't really want to go anymore. It was incredibly dangerous. Very difficult to operate there. And also, the US's interest was starting to wane a little bit because people were so disheartened by the sort of - I'm trying to find an appropriate word that does not use bad language - but by the disaster of what the war had devolved into. And so, they were

starting to become inured to these evening news stories.

So, I was very lucky in that sense because they still needed people to go there. They still needed people to do the work. And I kept putting my hand. And so, off I went at 25.

And I knew nothing about war. I had never been in a war zone. I was very privileged to have traveled a lot in my childhood. My father lived in Hong Kong. We lived between the US and the UK. I had friends in the Middle East, and I had been to the Gulf before. But I had never been to anywhere like Baghdad. And I had never, as I said, been in a conflict zone.

So, it was an extraordinary experience. And I think the overwhelming feeling that first time that I set foot in a conflict arena is this feeling of being perpetually thrilled and, like, you're learning every second. Every pore, every fiber of your being is constantly learning, is taking in new information. And it's extremely thrilling and very exciting. But it's also a lot to take in, a lot to absorb, a lot to try to parse through in your mind.

And then the other thing I would just say I took from that first trip was it was the first time I really understood that you can die doing this job. That war is not glamorous. That it's not just adventures. That it's incredibly dangerous, incredibly challenging and difficult work. And that you will be subjected, not just your own personal safety, but those you see around you and people whose trauma you will be witnessing on a regular basis. So it was quite an awakening.

**JOHN WALDRON:** All right. So your next move after Fox, I think, was to ABC News where you became the Moscow correspondent, I believe. You describe it as a time when most Russians had had enough of democracy. And as Americans we certainly take freedom of the press for granted at times. How did you learn to do your job in a place that lacked that freedom?

**CLARISSA WARD:** Well, I guess the one thing that living between Beirut and Baghdad had prepared me for in that sense was that as an American living in other countries, and particularly as a journalist, you have to try to leave some of your assumptions at the door. And that doesn't mean that you come in and say, "Oh yeah, it's okay for there not to be freedom of press." Or "Oh yeah, it's okay for journalists to be, you know, assassinated." Of course you don't do that. But what you do is you go in with an open mind in the sense that you want to listen. And I've

always said that I believe my primary purpose and function as a journalist is to listen to people. To listen to people, to get a better understanding of their experience of the world, and to try to tell their stories.

The other thing, of course, that I had learned from my time in Iraq is that democracy doesn't always work for everyone at any given time in their history. And it's important to remember and understand that the years after Perestroika and Glasnost with the end of the Soviet Union, were incredibly chaotic and destabilizing for the vast majority of people in the former Soviet Union, and particularly in Russia. And I remember visiting there in the late 1990s and seeing old ladies begging for enough money so that they could just buy themselves macaroni and ketchup to live on. And this was a country where people had been taken care of their whole lives. And I'm not trying to glamorize the Soviet system, I'm only trying to make a point that they had never had to worry about feeding themselves in the past. And now they've been told that this entire system that they've believed in was not real, was not good, and it had been replaced with another system that really was not functioning in a way that it served the people, in the way that we tend to think of democracy as serving the people at all.

So, it was, again, a real education. But I learned an enormous amount because I understood that sometimes people are willing to voluntarily give up freedom for stability. And this is always the dangerous moment whenever you're in a society where things are very chaotic and where people are being bombarded with a lot of conflicting information, there is a vacuum that is created. And it is very easy for authoritarians of all different stripes to sort of step in and fill that vacuum.

**JOHN WALDRON:** Yeah. I want to ask you, your experience as both a journalist and a woman, you know, has been-- you describe it well in the book, but it's a complicated experience. You had an experience in Moscow with Saif Gaddafi, the son the late Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Maybe talk about that a bit and how some of these experiences that you have been through as a journalist and as a woman kind of shaped you and what you've learned.

**CLARISSA WARD:** Yeah. I mean, it is always complicated. And there is always this kind of push-pull. Saif Gaddafi was a very unusual circumstance to be in. I was invited to a very small dinner at a very wealthy Russian American friend's house. And there were eight of us there. Saif Gaddafi was the guest of

honor. He arrived about three hours later. He said that he didn't want to eat anything, even though the host had been preparing this feast for him all day. And he proceeded to get very drunk.

He completely ignored me at the table. And only directed his questions and commentary to men at the table. Even though I was the only one at the table who spoke Arabic, who lived in the Middle East. But whatever. You know, I was like, irritated by it. But fine.

And then at the end of the dinner we all decided to go to a nightclub which is very popular and very common in Russia. And so, we were getting into this car to go to this nightclub and I was seated in the middle in the backseat and Saif was next to me. And he just suddenly turned to me. I don't think he even knew my name. He didn't say anything. He just said, "Baby," and then he tried to kiss me and tried to put his tongue in my mouth.

And I remember I just started laughing because I was like, what are you talking about? I mean there was no preamble. There was no nothing, like, "Oh, you look so pretty tonight." No, no, just immediately going in for the kill. And so, I kept fending him off and saying, like, "Oh gosh, this is so silly. You know, I'm a journalist. Ha ha. You probably don't want to be trying to assault me in the back of a Mercedes in Moscow because, you know, I work for an American network and this is ridiculous." And he kept on going, kept on going.

And finally I cursed at him in Arabic. I said, "[FOREIGN LANGUAGE NOT TRANSCRIBED]" which means "enough you son of a," you know, lady who does things in the evening for money. And it was sort of an awkward moment because I was, like, oh, maybe I've pushed it too far and I'm going to end up in a ditch. But anyway, he thought it was actually tremendously charming because he was so drunk. And then he was like, "Oh, I'm in love with you."

Anyway, I got rid of him. But the point stays the same. How do you navigate that situation as a woman? Okay. I'm a journalist. This is someone who could be important for my work. Do I defend myself? Do I try to diffuse the situation with humor? Do I push back forcefully as I did in the end? How do I maintain the semblance of being charming without being aggressive? And like as women, we're always walking this tightrope trying to find that perfect fine line. And you know, I'll be honest with you,

John. The thing that irritated me more even than him being sort of a lech and trying to kiss me in the back of this car was the fact that he had dismissed me at the dinner, that he had not asked a single question and not really given me a chance to engage with him at all. On a certain level my ego found that more galling even than the latter part of the evening. But, you know, it's a lot better now than it used to be, but you still run into those situations. And you still, as a woman, are trying to find that perfect balance between pushing back without being too pushy.

**JOHN WALDRON:** Do you think it's a lot better than it used to be? Because there do seem to be some quite powerful female journalists around the world that have risen to great heights, yourself included. So, it feels like things are going, you know, in a better direction. But I'm interested if you really believe that.

**CLARISSA WARD:** I definitely believe that. And there are. If you look at the journalists who were covering Syria, for example. I mean, some of the greatest journalists covering the Syrian civil war were women. Women are now all over the place covering conflict and winning awards and kicking ass and taking names. And so, I definitely think there's been an improvement. And comments that people would have made to me in Baghdad when I was 25, no one would dare to make them even to the 25-year-old producer for their first time in a war zone. So, I do think that improvements have been made.

But of course, you know, subtle misogyny is still pervasive. It's still out there. It still exists. And you know, I'm sure it will be for some time.

I don't want to make the mistake, though, of giving people the impression that being a woman is a hindrance. In many, many instances being a woman for me has been an asset. In conservative Muslim countries across the world I have access to 50 percent of the population that my male colleagues have no access to at all. I can put on an abaya and a niqab, covering my face and my body, and I can go completely under the radar. One colleague jokingly called it my cloak of invisibility. And more generally, I think often women were perceived as being less threatening than our male colleagues, which in a hostile environment can often be a positive thing. So, it cuts both ways.

**JOHN WALDRON:** That's a good point. All right, so after Moscow

you were offered a position as ABC's Asia correspondent in Beijing. So, you went from one very interesting, very relevant country to another. You write about how both the economic angle and the language barrier made the China beat completely different. Describe those challenges and just talk about your experience of China.

**CLARISSA WARD:** Ohh. So, when I was at Yale, my dad, who was an investment banker for many years, my dad kept telling me, "You've got to do an economics class." And I was always like, "Ugh, gosh, there's like no way. That's so boring. I'm much more interested in French new wave cinema. Blah, blah, blah." And now I'm like so mortified and I really should have done an econ class because you get to China and you realize that at its heart this is an economic story. Right? And you have to become au fait with, you know, the intricacies of, you know, trade deficit and what it means to artificially lower your currency and what the ramifications of that are for, you know, different countries around the world.

And so, it was a real crash course. I literally called my father who was living in Hong Kong at the time and I called him and I was like, "Dad, I really need you to help me out here because I need to learn all about this. I need to understand this. And I need to, basically, round out my understanding of the world," which up until that point was really sort of predicated on the sort of, like, major seismic world events as opposed to seeing the world in economic terms and seeing the global dynamics and shifts that happen as a result of that interconnectedness. So, that was my first education.

Then, of course as you say, I had to start learning Mandarin, which I hadn't really intended. I love languages. I speak quite a few of them. But I hadn't intended to try to learn Mandarin until I realized when I got to Beijing that, like, no Mandarin, no life. Like, no taxi. No drink at the bar. No seat in a restaurant. Like you needed, at that time at least, to learn basic Mandarin to get around.

My other frustration was in the Middle East I could cover myself and kind of disappear. I can't do that in China. I'm like a foot above most people there. And I'm very, obviously, not Chinese. And that made things a little more challenging because it means people see me coming from a mile away. I'm very, obviously, a foreigner. I've got a big camera with me. I'm also very, obviously, a journalist. And so that sort of forced me to rethink the way you tell stories.

And in general, you know, the other thing I would add to this is how do we as storytellers, as journalists, make these economic stories interesting and accessible to a wider populace who is not necessarily engaged on these really important, critical issues? But how do we humanize them? How do we give it a face? How do we make it relatable? And so, that was very much an education for me in China. And I learned a lot about the world. And I learned a lot about the different ways you can tell stories to achieve those objectives.

**JOHN WALDRON:** All right. I want to talk about some of the war zone reporting that you've done. Maybe we can start in Syria. Because I found the passages that you wrote on Syria to be among the most sort of raw in the book. It seemed to have a real personal impact on you in the context of how you reported it back in the book. So, maybe just talk about what you saw in Syria and your reactions to the war zone, you know, sort of feeling that you encountered there.

**CLARISSA WARD:** Yeah. So, you know, with most war zones that you cover, you go to the front line for the day. And at the end of the day you go back to your hotel, which is usually a good 50 or 60 clicks away, at least, from the front line. And that means that you have this space to decompress. You do your work. There's usually other journalists at the hotel. You're not worried in that precise moment about your personal security, or you're not overly, overly concerned about it. And it gives you a distance from a conflict and a moment to process, to unpack, to talk to family members, whatever it might be.

When you're in Syria, and when I was there and you're on the rebel side, you can't stay in a hotel. And that means you're living with these people. You're in their homes. You're in their houses. You're sleeping in the same room as their children. You're there when they die in the battle. And that happened on my second or third trip after the uprising began. I was staying with a group of fighters and their families who were from the City of Idlib. And one of the brothers was killed. And I was in the house when the women found out. I was in the room with them while they were pulling their hair out and wailing and rocking back and forth on the ground. I was in the garage where they brought his body for the night and recited the Koran throughout the evening. And I was there the next morning when the mother of the house still, remarkably, brought us a whole plate of food to have for breakfast, even though their whole world had just collapsed. And we were there as they walked and carried his

coffin on their shoulders to be buried the next morning.

So, it is extraordinary to have that level of intimacy, both with people's grief, with violence, with the trauma that you're witnessing, and very unusual not to have a place or a space to step back from it, to recuse yourself in a moment. Both to give yourself a break, but also to give people some privacy in some of their more desperate moments.

And I came to understand that that was part of the job in Syria. That witnessing this trauma was a big part of why I was there. And what I was there to do.

And just to give you a sense and anyone watching a sense, I have covered conflicts in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Yemen. I have never seen anything quite on the scale of Syria in terms of, first of all, the David and Goliath dynamic of this fight. Because on the one hand you have this bunch of, well, it started out as peaceful protesters who were met with a hail of bullets. Then it became an armed resistance. But you're talking about an armed resistance of carpenters and green grocers who had very little military experience who didn't even have the first few times we stayed with them two way radios, fighting, you know, a seasoned professional army with tanks and an air force. Okay?

And when the uprising started to gain some momentum, I think that's when Bashar al-Assad, you know, the President of Syria, and his army began to just-- they kept crossing new lows, new bars of atrocities that they were willing to go to in order to maintain control. And it was bombing and targeting of hospitals, of schools. It was targeting fruit markets. Anything that constituted a symbol of normalcy in rebel held territory was bombed or razed off the face of the earth. Because the message to people living there was, "You will never be allowed to have a normal life. You kneel to Assad or you starve." And they were. They were starved. They were bombed. They were tortured. They were imprisoned. They were gassed.

And what was extraordinarily frustrating, and frankly heartbreaking as a journalist watching this happen, was that the international community was completely hamstrung in its response. And the only people who were not hamstrung, who were not sort of twisting their hands on the sidelines were the Russians and the Iranians who were very clear about what they wanted to do, which was to continue to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad. And that enabled Bashar al-Assad to remain in power until this day. And arguably he has won what may be a

Pyrrhic victory, but nonetheless he's in control of two thirds of that country. And in this day and age with all that we've learned about genocide and chemical weapons, it is incredible to me that a man who has been responsible for the deaths of nearly half a million of his own people in the most brutal of manners is still able to continue to rule that country.

**JOHN WALDRON:** One of the things I just want to ask you a little finer point on is this notion of solving the problem when you're in the field. You see the problem in front of you and you must have the instinct that you want to do something about it, versus illuminating it and reporting and telling the stories. Just talk about that tension, if you would.

**CLARISSA WARD:** Yeah. So, I mean, I think this is one that a lot of journalists struggle with. And particularly when you're covering war, right, because you're seeing suffering in such intense ways that you're instinct as a human being is, "I must help. I must put down what I'm doing. I must hold this person's hand. I must try to get them out of the country. I must try to get them food." And what you come to understand after you've been doing it for a while is that's not your job. And that doesn't mean you can't help. And that doesn't mean your work won't help. And that doesn't mean there aren't some extreme circumstances where, yes, put down the camera and save someone's life. Okay?

But what it means is that if you start to think of your job as being not only to cover what's happening in Syria, but also to try to precipitate an end to the Syrian civil war, or not only to raise awareness in the world about what's happening, but also to push governments or push the White House to militarily intervene in Syria, that's not your job.

And for me that became very clear in Syria because I was so deeply invested in it. Because I was giving of myself in ways that, frankly, were unsustainable and losing so many friends, whether they were Western journalists who were executed or kidnapped, or many Syrians who I spent time with who were killed or disappeared. I started to realize that I was falling into something of a depression because I was giving so much. I was losing so much. And yet, nothing I was doing or saying was apparently getting the Syrian people any closer to having their suffering mitigated in some way, shape, or form. And I think it was around that time where I really had an epiphany and I understood that in order to do this job for the full marathon, in the long term, to not burn out, essentially, you have to be

able to understand your role in a much more humble way. And for me, that was to understand my job is to illuminate the problem. To tell the story. To bear witness. To keep a record and to give a voice to people who might not have one. My job is not to prescribe how this problem should be solved. My job is not to end this war.

And once I understood my role as a journalist in a slightly more modest way, it made it much more bearable in terms of understanding that the fact that I couldn't change the course of the Syrian Civil War was not a reflection of my abilities or, frankly, a reflection of what I should be doing at all.

So, I like to share that with other journalists as well because I think so often there's this fine line between journalism and activism and where does one end and where does the next begin? And what is our role and what is our responsibility? And I think we have to be a little humble in how we approach it.

**JOHN WALDRON:** That's good advice. Let's talk about US/China. We've talked about China from your experiences and what you write about in the book. But obviously, the US/China relationship right now is in a particularly, I'd say, precarious position from my vantage point. I'm interested in your take as someone who's been on the ground, as someone who's followed this relationship, as somebody who understands a lot about China. I'm just interested in your take on the relationship and the impact it's having on the world.

**CLARISSA WARD:** Yeah. I mean, for me, China, when people ask me "What's your biggest concern with regards to foreign policy," it is the growing possibility that there could be a cold war between the US and China. And I think everybody understands that there have always been areas of real tension between the US and China. And when I was living there, of course, whether it was, you know, human rights issues, whether it was intellectual property issues, there were real disagreements. However, there was also this kind of broader excitement about areas of mutual cooperation, areas of mutual economic benefit. And Hollywood, for example, was really ramping up its presence in China. And increasingly understanding that in order for their movies to be successful they needed to be attractive to a Chinese audience.

Now I look at where we are and I see that we're sort of on the precipice of, you know, one wrong foot and we could be looking at some kind of a cold war with China. And it's a cold war, frankly, that no one stands to benefit from. Not in the US and

not in China. And I think that people in power do understand that.

I think more broadly speaking that President Xi Jinping, you talk to diplomats who have spent time with him, and they will say that he is a singularly impressive and forceful character. And I think any US president, whether it's going to be another term of Trump or whether it's going to be Vice President Biden, is going to find it very challenging to navigate that relationship. I think it is a difficult one.

At the same time, one thing that I would point out is that China doesn't necessarily have any really close allies. It has countries or states that it has mutual interests with or countries or states that it sponsors. But the US's traditional strength in many ways has been its strong alliances with many countries. Not just in Europe, but also in Asia on China's doorstep. That's obviously been a source of friction between the two countries.

So, we have seen over the last four years the erosion of these alliances between the US and various different countries. And there is certainly a lot of anxiety, particularly here in Europe, about whether the US is going to return to a more traditional posture, whereby these traditional alliances are seen as being hugely important to the US's power and hegemony globally speaking. So, yeah. I think it will be very, very interesting to see what happens next with China. And I only hope that we'll start to see a lessening of tensions instead of a ratcheting up.

**JOHN WALDRON:** All right, I'm going to close just by one last super quick question. You called the book a love letter to journalism, which I think is an apt description. What do you hope young, aspiring journalists take away from your own story as they embark on their career?

**CLARISSA WARD:** You know, this is a career that you have to want with every fiber of your being. If you're kind of on the fence about it, it's not going to happen for you. You have to feel huge amounts of passion and drive to do this job. It's an enormous privilege. You get to have a front row seat on history. But there are a lot of sacrifices along the way as well, whether that's on your personal life, whether that's if you go into conflict reporting and some of the very difficult things you'll have to deal with there.

I think there has never been a more important time to become a journalist. And I am so thrilled when I speak to young, aspiring journalists who humble me every day and reach out to me and are so full of creative ideas about storytelling, who have such a deeper knowledge of technology and how that can be harnessed in order to do deeper investigative reporting, I'm very excited to see all the wonderful things that the next generation of journalists are going to do. And I very much encourage anyone who loves journalism to go out there and do it because we need lots of great journalists.

**JOHN WALDRON:** Clarissa, I want to thank you so much for taking the time. You were terrific. It's great to have you at Goldman Sachs. We really appreciate your time and your willingness to share your thoughts and your stories and your perspectives with us at this important period.

**CLARISSA WARD:** Thank you so much. I really, really enjoyed our conversation.

**JOHN WALDRON:** Good. Be well. Stay safe. Take care of your two boys.

**CLARISSA WARD:** Thank you.

**JOHN WALDRON:** Bye.

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