Transcript By Lulu Garcia-Navarro January 4, 2025 | nytimes.com

Antony Blinken Insists He and Biden Made the Right Calls

At the end of a tenure marked by war and division, the outgoing Secretary of State defends his legacy on Gaza and Ukraine, and says he's made America stronger.

– Please raise your right hand and repeat after me. – Four years ago, President Biden came into office with the world still wracked by the coronavirus pandemic, and the biggest global challenge was to save lives and get economies back on their feet. After the tumultuous first Trump presidency, when it came to foreign policy, the new administration wanted to rebuild old relationships and stand firmly for democracy. – We will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again, not to meet yesterday's challenges, but today's and tomorrow's challenges. – Those challenges came fast for Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who was beset by an escalating series of international crises, from the Afghanistan withdrawal to Russia's invasion of Ukraine to Hamas's attack on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza and conflict in the wider Middle East. All the while, Blinken championed the promise of robust American diplomacy to solve the world's many problems. – I hope that when we look back on this period in time, one of the conclusions that people will reach is that the United States was leaning in. – Now, a new Trump administration is set to lean back from those very alliances and institutions Blinken championed. Conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East rage on, and what role America will play in the changing global order is an open question. On Thursday, as he enters the last few weeks of his tenure, Blinken sat down with me at the State Department for a wide-ranging conversation about the world he's leaving behind. – I think we hand over an America in a much, much stronger position — – which, despite it all, he argues, is better than the one he inherited. I'm Lulu Garcia-Navarro, and here's my interview with Secretary of State Antony Blinken. – Secretary Blinken, four years ago, you inherited the world from President Trump, and now you're about to hand it back to him. Your tenure has been an unprecedented interregnum, if you will. Have you thought about what a strange position that is to be in? – Well, I think a lot about the two sides of this coin that you just alluded to: what we inherited, and what we're handing off. In terms of what we inherited, it's so easy to lose sight because people are focused understandably on the present and on the future, not on the past. But if you just look back four years, when we took office, we inherited arguably the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. We inherited the worst public health crisis in at least 100 years. We had a country that was divided, and we had fraught relationships with allies and partners around the world, and a perception from our adversaries, whether it was Russia, whether it was China, other countries, that the United States was in inexorable decline. Today, as I sit with you and as we look at all of the terrain we've traveled these last four years, I think we hand over an America in a much, much stronger position, having come through the economic crisis, having come through the health crisis and having changed, much for the better, our position around the world, because we've made those investments in alliances and partnerships. – And thinking back to when you first came into office, President Biden painted a portrait of a world that was seeing a battle between democracy and autocracy, a phrase that was repeatedly used. Yet at home, voters have been skeptical of that fight. Many voters bought into President-elect Trump's vision of an America that should be less involved in the world. Why don't you think that the Biden administration and you in particular were able to convince voters of the benefit of what you have been endeavoring to do these past few years? – I'm not sure that I agree with the premise of the question, which is, from what I see, from what I read, from the analysis that I see, most Americans want us to be engaged in the world. They want to make sure that we stay out of wars, that we avoid conflict, which is exactly what we've done. But they want to see the United States engaged. And I think they understand that if we're not engaged, if

we're not leading, then one of two things is likely: Someone else will do it in our place, and probably not in a way that reflects our interests and our values — maybe it's China, maybe it's some other country — or, maybe just as bad, no one does it. And then you're likely to have a vacuum that's filled by bad things before it's filled with good things. And, inevitably, that comes back to bite us. And from what I see, most Americans understand that, believe that and want to see us leading and engaged. – So you don't believe that the election was a repudiation of the vision of President Biden and your vision in particular? Because obviously President-elect Trump has a very different idea of how to engage in the world. – First, one of the things in this job that I've appreciated about it is I don't do politics, I do policy. So the real question is, What are the policies that can make a difference in the lives of Americans, can make them a little bit safer, a little bit more full of opportunity, a little bit healthier? That's what we're really focused on. How do these policies that we're pursuing around the world translate into real benefits for the American people? In terms of analysis, the election — really not my place to do it. And there are lots of different views on why the election came up. – I'm not asking you to do politics, I'm just asking for a little reflection on, this is something you've given your life to. Obviously, the results were a disappointment. And so I wonder if that doesn't seek you to pause and reflect that perhaps that animating vision that you have had might not have been what Americans wanted. I mean, do you think there's just a changing sense in this country of our place in the world and what we owe our allies? – So again, I'm not at all sure that the election turned on any one or even collection of foreign policy issues. Most elections don't. But leaving that aside, Americans don't want us in conflict. They don't want us in war. We went through 20 years where we had hundreds of thousands of Americans deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. People were tired of that, understandably. Well, when President Biden was vice president, he presided over the end of our engagement in Iraq in terms of the war there and ending — ending that part of the conflict. As president, he ended the longest war in our history, Afghanistan. The investments that we've made in our NATO alliance, maybe we haven't done a good enough job explaining it. And that's the case. That's on me. But one of the things that we've tried to explain to Americans who, given that this is a generation, of course, that is far removed from World War II, never mind World War I, the reason so many of the institutions, including NATO, came into being in the first place was to try to make sure that we never had another global conflagration after World War II. And the strength of an alliance like NATO is in the basic bargain that countries make in joining it, and that is an attack on one is an attack on all. That is the single most powerful way to prevent conflict in the first place, to deter aggression. I think when we can put it in those terms and Americans can see that we're making investments in something like the NATO alliance precisely because we want to avoid conflict, we want to prevent war, we want to deter aggression, that's something that they sign on to, that they buy into. – I want to pick up on something that you said there, which is discussing Afghanistan, because this takes us back, I think, to the beginning of your tenure. I think it is reasonable to argue that American skepticism of the Biden administration's handling on foreign policy really began with the catastrophic way we got out of Afghanistan. There was consensus that we should absolutely end that war, but the manner in which it was done was very detrimental. When President Biden first took office, there was this promise that you and everyone else that was being brought on board were the adults in the room that were going to be ending the chaos of the Trump administration. How did that early failure in Afghanistan really change the sense, do you think, that President Biden really had this under control, that you had it under control? Did it damage America's credibility? – First, I make no apologies for ending America's longest war. This, I think, is a signal achievement of the presidents. The fact that we will not have another generation of Americans fighting and dying in Afghanistan, I think that's an important achievement in and of itself. It's also actually strengthened our position around the world, and I see that every single day. Our adversaries would have liked nothing more than for us to have remained bogged down in Afghanistan, and for another decade — would have been good by them. – But you've left a country that is in control of the Taliban, where the stated dream of spreading democracy has been completely upended. Women have borne the brunt of that. There's restrictions on their movements, restrictions on even their voices, what jobs they can take. I

mean, in every possible way, the manner in which this was done and the state in which Afghanistan has been left could not have been what the United States desired. – There was never going to be an easy way to extricate ourselves from 20 years of war. I think the question was, What were we going to do moving forward from the withdrawal? We also had to learn lessons from Afghanistan itself here at the State Department. One of the things that I ordered almost immediately was an after-action review to try to make sure that we understood what had we gotten right, and also what had we gotten wrong in the withdrawal itself. I brought back senior diplomats to do that. We produced a lengthy report with about 40 recommendations. We followed through on most of them to make sure that we're in a better position to deal with a crisis, to deal with an evacuation like Afghanistan. And we are, and in fact, we've actually put into practice many of those recommendations in subsequent crises that we had to face, whether it was in Lebanon, whether it was in Israel, whether it was in Sudan. All of that we brought to bear based on lessons that we've learned from Afghanistan. – Six months after Afghanistan, Russia invaded Ukraine. That was February of 2022. I mean, I remember that moment as being terrifying. How close were we to direct conflict? Look, there have been different moments where we had real concerns about actions that Russia might take, including even potentially the use of nuclear weapons. That very much focused the mind. But again, I think throughout we've been able to navigate this in a way that has kept us away from direct conflict with Russia. Now Russia is engaged in all sorts of nefarious activities, so-called hybrid attacks of one kind or another, whether it's in cyberspace, whether it's acts of sabotage, assassination, those things are happening. They're happening in Europe. And this is something that we're working very closely on with many of our partners. But in terms of direct conflict, I don't think we've been — I don't think we've been close, but it's something that we've had to be very, very mindful of. – You made two early strategic decisions on Ukraine. The first, because of that fear of direct conflict, was to restrict Ukraine's use of American weapons within Russia. The second was to support Ukraine's military offensive without a parallel diplomatic track to try and end the conflict. How do you look back on those decisions now? – So first, if you look at the trajectory of the conflict, because we saw it coming, we were able to make sure that not only were we prepared and allies and partners were prepared, but that Ukraine was prepared. We made sure that well before the Russian aggression happened, starting in September — the Russian aggression happened in February — starting in September, and then again in December, we quietly got a lot of weapons to Ukraine to make sure that they had in hand what they needed to defend themselves. Things like Stingers, Javelins that they could use that were instrumental in preventing Russia from taking Kyiv from rolling over the country, erasing it from the map and indeed pushing the Russians back. But I think what's so important to understand is at different points in time, people get focused on one weapon system or another. Is it an Abrams tank? Is it an F-16? Is it an ATACMS, a missile? What we've had to look at each and every time is not only should we give this particular system to the Ukrainians, but do they know how to use it? Do they have the requisite training? Can they maintain it? Is it part of a coherent plan? All of those things factored into the decisions we made on what to give them and when to give it. But in each and every time, it was to make sure that they had what they needed to defend themselves. In terms of diplomacy, look, we've exerted extraordinary diplomacy in bringing and keeping together more than 50 countries, not only in Europe but well beyond, in support of Ukraine and in defense of these principles that Russia also attacked back in February of that year. Look, I worked very hard in the lead-up to the war, including meetings with my Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, in Geneva a couple of months before the war, trying to find a way to see if we could prevent it, trying to test the proposition whether this was really about Russia's concerns for its security, concerns somehow about Ukraine and the threat it posed, or NATO and the threat that it posed, or whether this was about what it in fact is about, which is Putin's imperial ambitions and the desire to recreate a greater Russia, to subsume Ukraine back into Russia. But we had to test that proposition, and we were intensely engaged diplomatically with Russia. Since then, since then, had there been any opportunity to engage diplomatically in a way that could end the war on just and durable terms, we would have been the first to seize them. Unfortunately, at least till this moment, we haven't seen any signs that Russia's been genuinely prepared to engage. I hope that

that changes. – However, Ukraine has been left in this position now where a new administration is coming in, they have a very different view of the conflict and one could argue that Ukraine is not in a terribly strong position to be able to navigate what comes next. We know that President-elect Trump has members of people that surround him that are very willing to see Ukraine cede territory to Russia. There has been no parallel diplomatic track, and the weapons are probably going to be drying up. So, I mean, do you feel like you've left Ukraine in the strongest position that you could have, or were there things that you could have done differently? – Well, first what we've left is Ukraine, which was not self-evident because Putin's ambition was to erase it from the map. We stopped that. Putin has failed. His strategic objective in regaining Ukraine has failed and will not succeed. Ukraine is standing, and I believe it also has extraordinary potential not only to survive, but actually to thrive going forward. And that does depend on decisions that future administrations and many other countries will make. Right now, where — as I'm looking at this, I think the real measure of success is whether, going forward, Ukraine will continue to stand strong as an independent country, increasingly integrated with Western institutions and able to stand on its own feet militarily, economically, democratically. And in each of those areas, we put Ukraine on a trajectory to do that. Do you think it's time to end the war, though? – These are decisions for Ukrainians to make. They have to decide where their future is and how they want to get there. Where the line is drawn on the map, at this point, I don't think is fundamentally going to change very much. The real question is, Can we make sure that Ukraine is in a position to move forward strongly? — You mean that the areas that Russia controls, you feel will have to be ceded? – Ceded is not the question. The question is, The line, as a practical matter, in the foreseeable future is unlikely to move very much. Ukraine's claim on that territory will always, always be there. And the question is, Will they find ways, with the support of others, to regain territory that's been lost? I think the critical thing now going forward is this: If there is going to be a resolution or at least a near-term resolution, because it's unlikely that Putin will give up on his ambitions, if there's a cease-fire, then in Putin's mind, the cease-fire is likely to give him time to rest, to refit, to reattack at some point in the future. So what's going to be critical to make sure that any cease-fire that comes about is actually enduring is to make sure that Ukraine has the capacity going forward to deter further aggression, and that can come in many forms. It could come through NATO, and we put Ukraine on a path to NATO membership. It could come through security assurances, commitments, guarantees by different countries to make sure that Russia knows that if it reattacks, it's going to have a big problem. That, I think, is going to be critical to making sure that any deal that's negotiated actually endures and then allows Ukraine the space, the time to grow strong as a country. – It's interesting. What I'm hearing you say is that Ukraine's fate will no longer rest in its major support of the United States. You see it as resting elsewhere, Europe, etc. – Look, I hope very much and I don't want to say expect, but I certainly hope very much that the United States will remain the vital supporter that it's been for Ukraine, because, again, this is not just about Ukraine. It's never just been about Ukraine. – Well, let me pick up on something that you said and the idea of this interregnum that you have had of picking up from Trump and handing back to Trump, because this is one of the conflicts that will be handed back to Trump. And his approach to foreign policy writ large seems to be to avoid engaging militarily while wanting the world to be scared of us. He doesn't seem terribly interested in the work of diplomacy. I'm curious both how you would define that foreign policy philosophy and what you think of that approach. – To me, as I said before, in the absence of American diplomacy, you're going to have diplomacy by lots of other countries that are going to shape the world in ways that may not be so friendly to our own interests and our own values. So that's a choice. We can disengage. We can not be present. We can stand back, but we know others will step in and we have to decide whether that's in our interest. – I mean, it's not that he wants to stand back, it's that he uses other methods to make countries bend to America's will. You've seen, you know, some of these actions. – Let's take an example. Let's take a concrete example. Let's talk about China for a minute. I think President Trump was right during his first administration in identifying some of the challenges posed by China. No country has the capacity that China does to reshape to its own will and designs the international system that we and many

others put in place after the second World War. It has the military power, the economic power, the diplomatic power to do that in ways that no other country does. And we also know that many of the practices it's engaged in have been grossly unfair to our workers, to our companies, undercutting them, driving them out of business. So I think he was right in identifying that problem. Where I would disagree with the approach he took and where I would commend to him the approach that we pursued is we're so much more effective in dealing with the challenges posed by China when we're working closely with other countries. So if you're trying to take on the China problem, but at the same time, you're taking actions that, in one way or another, alienate allies and partners, you're likely to be less effective in dealing with China. When we took office, the European Union was on the verge of signing a major trade agreement with China. They were hedging. They weren't sure if they could count on the United States. We'd had real challenges in the relationships in the preceding four years, and they were hedging toward China. So were many other countries. We were really on the decline when it came to dealing with China diplomatically and economically. We've reversed that. And so I think the difference is, the way we've approached it is we've sought to bring other countries in to dealing with this challenge. When we're dealing with China's economic practices that we don't like, and we're doing it alone, we're 20 percent of world G.D.P., when we've aligned, Europeans, key allies and partners in the Asia Pacific were suddenly 40, 50, 60 percent of world G.D.P., something that China can't ignore. And again and again, what I've seen over these last four years is a convergence in the approach taken to China with Europe and with Asia that we've not seen before. And I know it's succeeding because every time I meet with my Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, the foreign minister, he inevitably spends 30, 40 minutes, 60 minutes complaining about everything we've done to align other countries, to build this convergence in dealing with things that we don't like that China is pursuing. So to me, that is the proof point that we're much better off through diplomacy. – So do you think, then, that President-elect Trump's plan to place heavy tariffs on Chinese goods up to possibly 60 percent blanket tariffs, also to place tariffs on our allies, Canada and other countries, is that misguided? – Look, tariffs have their place. – Yes, the Biden administration had their own. — And I think when they're strategically focused, then they can be a very effective and important tool. Look, the jury is out on exactly what the incoming administration does. We'll see. All I'm saying is, I think there is a strategic utility, but they should be not, in my judgment at least, when you do them across the board, then the people who usually pay the price are consumers, because it's a tax that gets passed along to them, because the producers of whatever the product is have to raise their prices because it's suddenly a lot more expensive to do business. – Just one last question on China. One of the things that I have been curious about is how the world sees the whiplash of our foreign policy just changing from one administration to the other so dramatically. How do you think China, for example, sees our increasingly inconsistent foreign policy during the last decade that has seemed to just go from one extreme to the other? Are they exploiting it, or are they concerned about it? – Look, I think if you're sitting in Beijing, and I've sat across the table from President Xi Jinping on several occasions in Beijing, as close as we are now, and I think what he sees is something that he didn't see four years ago. Four years ago, when he looked at the United States, he saw a country that he thought was in inexorable decline and China in an inexorable ascendancy. I think that picture looks very, very different today. And I also think that what he's seeing is a United States that recognizes Republicans and Democrats, everything in between, that China poses a profound challenge to us, and it's going to be an enduring challenge. We're in a competition to shape what the future looks like, and that competition doesn't have a clear finish line. It's not like ending a war. It's going to be there for a long time. And the question is, Have we set ourselves up in the best possible way to approach that competition from a position of strength? And I believe that's exactly what we've done. – I do want to turn to what has become the defining crisis of this era, which is the conflict in Gaza. You came in thinking you could broker a historic agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel, and then Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7 with the horrific results, which we saw. And Israel's response has been extreme. The latest U.N. figures put the Palestinian death toll at $45,000. Over 90 percent of Gaza's population is now displaced. The population is starving. All hospitals have been destroyed. In November, a U.N. committee

released a report that found Israel's warfare practices, quote, "consistent with the characteristics of genocide." I know you don't agree with that estimation, but do you believe that Israel's actions have been consistent with the rules of war? – Let's step back for a second and think about where we were on Oct. 6, and then where we were on Oct. 7, and where we've been since then. You're right. On Oct. 6, we were very much pursuing normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. And, in fact, I was scheduled to go to Saudi Arabia and Israel on Oct. 10 — trip obviously that didn't happen because the events of Oct. 7. But the purpose of that trip was to work on the Palestinian component of any normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel, because we believed and the Saudis also said it was usually important to make sure that if there was going to be normalization, there was also a pathway toward a Palestinian state. That's exactly what I was going to the region to work on. Well, as I said, that trip didn't happen. Since Oct. 7, we've had some core goals in mind. I was there, I was in Israel and then in the region five days later. I saw horrors beyond anyone's imagination inflicted on men, women and children. And we were determined to do everything we could to help ensure that Oct. 7 would never happen again. We also wanted to make sure that the war wouldn't spread, that conflict wouldn't spread to other fronts, to other countries, because that would mean more death and destruction. It would also mean that the actions Israel was taking in Gaza were likely to endure even longer. And I can come to that in a minute. Third, we wanted to make sure, to the best of our ability, that the children, the women, the men in Gaza who are caught in a crossfire of Hamas's initiation that they did nothing to start and were basically powerless to stop were as protected as possible, and got the assistance they needed to survive this horrific conflict. And we've been working on each of those fronts every day since. When it comes to making sure that Oct. 7 can't happen again, I think we're in a good place. Israel has destroyed Hamas's military capabilities. It's eliminated the leadership that was responsible for Oct. 7. And that in and of itself should be reason to find an off-ramp in Gaza. – Well, destroying the territory. I mean, there's huge suffering. – And no one needs to remind me of the suffering because it's something that drives me every single day. It's exactly why we've done everything in our power to find a way to get an end to the conflict through getting the hostages back and getting a cease-fire. I've been to the region a dozen times with that in mind. – I mean, even Israel's former Israeli defense minister, Moshe Ya'alon, referred to what's happening in Gaza as war crimes and ethnic cleansing. I mean, this is internal criticism. This is not external. So I guess I would repeat the question and ask you, Has Israel respected the rules of war in Gaza? – We, as you know, have looked and continue to look at that in depth. And we put out — we put out our own reports on this with our own assessments. And when it comes to the actions that Israel has taken in its defense, in its just defense, in trying to make sure that Oct. 7 never happens again, we've said from Day 1 that how Israel does that matters. And throughout, starting on Day 1, we've tried to ensure that people had what they needed to get by. The very first trip that I made to Israel, five days after Oct. 7, I spent with my team nine hours in the Kirya, the I.D.F.'s headquarters in Tel Aviv, six stories underground with the Israeli government, including the prime minister, including arguing for hours on end about the basic proposition that the humanitarian assistance needed to get to Palestinians in Gaza, and that was an argument that took place because you had in Israel, in the days after Oct. 7, a totally traumatized society. And public opinion — this wasn't just the prime minister or a given leader in Israel. This was an entire society that didn't want any assistance getting to a single Palestinian in Gaza. I argued that for nine hours, President Biden was planning to come to Israel a few days later. And in the course of that argument, when I was getting resistance to the proposition of humanitarian assistance getting in, I told the prime minister, I'm going to call the president and tell him not to come if you don't allow this assistance to start flowing. And I called the president and to make sure that he agreed with that, and he fully did. Anyway, we got the agreement to begin assistance through Rafah, which we expanded to Kerem Shalom, to many other places. I say this by way of saying that we've tried all along to look out for the needs of so many people who've been caught in this horrific crossfire, and we have a traumatized Palestinian population for obvious reasons. I've met with Palestinian Americans who've lost loved ones in Gaza. I have with me still a little brochure that one fellow American made that has pictures of his family in Gaza on one side,

the left side, those who were killed, including children, and on the right side, those who were still alive. And that motivates me as well, every single day, to try to find a better way forward. Now Israel is operating in a unique environment, which doesn't absolve it of its responsibilities. – Have they met those responsibilities? – And when it comes, for example, to the provision of humanitarian assistance, we found periods of time where, no, we didn't think they were doing enough. And this is exactly why, most recently with Secretary Austin, we pressed them very hard to take actions that would ensure that more assistance got to people. – Because, as you know, withholding food aid is considered a war crime. And so what you're saying to me is that actually they didn't want to even provide food. – There's a difference between — there's a big difference between intent and result, whether it's under the law or under any one standard. The results that we were seeing were grossly insufficient. That is the results in getting people the assistance they needed, just as making sure that people are protected, I think, has been insufficient. There's a very different question about what was the intent. – What we've seen in Gaza is fairly indiscriminate. We have seen reporting of absolute devastation, entire areas flattened. And at the crux of this, of course, is the fact that the United States provides so many of these weapons to Israel. The 2,000-pound bombs that have killed Palestinian civilians, they get vetted through the State Department. And I know that the administration has been struggling with this the whole way through. But where we are now is that the war is still being prosecuted. Hamas is no longer deemed a threat in the way that it was, and the population has been completely decimated. So I'm curious, why still provide these weapons to Israel? – As I said from Day 1, first of all, we have been and we remain fundamentally committed to Israel's defense. And, unfortunately, it faces adversaries and enemies from all directions. And that means that the support that the United States provides over many administrations, Republican and Democrat, over many years, that support is absolutely vital to making sure that Israel is able to defend itself, that it can deter aggression coming from many other quarters, whether it's Hezbollah, whether it's Iran, whether it's the many Iranian-backed proxies, whether it's the Houthis, you name it. That support is vital to making sure Israel has a deterrent, has an adequate defense. And, in turn, that means that we're not going to have an even broader, wider conflict that results in more death and more destruction. And so it's been vital to maintain that. Second, we believed and continue to believe that the quickest way, the most effective way to have an enduring end to Gaza is through an agreement on a cease-fire that brings the hostages home. The two biggest impediments to getting that over the finish line — and we've been so close on several occasions, and as we speak today, we're also very close. There have been two major impediments, and they both go to what drives Hamas. One has been whenever there has been public daylight between the United States and Israel and the perception that pressure was growing on Israel. We've seen it. Hamas has pulled back from agreeing to a cease-fire and the release of hostages. And so there are times when what we say in private to Israel, where we have a disagreement, is one thing, and what we're doing or saying in public may be another, but that's in no small measure, because with this daylight, the prospects of getting the hostages and cease-fire deal over the finish line become more distant. – Well, there were moments when it seemed you were trying to draw red lines in public, telling Israel not to go into Rafah, for example. And then they did. Israel's prime minister — – They went into Rafah in a very different way than they were planning to do. – Benjamin Netanyahu never seemed to listen to you, though. – No, I disagree with that. And, again, I mentioned how we've gone at humanitarian assistance from Day 1, and that's been a perennial and ongoing effort throughout these — throughout this time. When it comes to Rafah, we had deep, deep concerns about a direct attack and the use of the 2,000-pound munitions in densely populated areas. What Israel wound up doing in Rafah was very different from what they were planning to do before we engaged with them. So in — – So you feel like you've been effective in shaping the conduct of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu? – I think the question that we had was, How can we most effectively both shape the conflict but also bring an end to the conflict? And the focus on getting a cease-fire hostage agreement was what was, in our estimation, the quickest and most durable way to get an end. And as I said, Hamas won. When they saw Israel under pressure publicly, they pulled back. The other thing that got Hamas to pull back was their belief, their hope that there would be a wider conflict,

that Hezbollah would attack Israel, that Iran would attack Israel, that other actors would attack Israel, and that Israel would have its hands full and Hamas could continue what it was doing. So we've worked very hard to make sure that didn't happen. Part of that was making sure that Israel had what it needed to defend itself to deter broader aggression. The second part of that was when we were on the precipice on multiple occasions of having the wider war that Hamas wanted, we found ways through diplomacy and through defense and deterrence to avert it. – Did you have a partner in Benjamin Netanyahu, because it was reported that he blocked a cease-fire deal in July that would have led to the hostages being released? Is that true? – No, that's not accurate. What we've seen time and again is Hamas not concluding a deal that it should have concluded. There have been times when actions that Israel has taken have, yes, made it more difficult. But there's been a rationale for those actions, even if they've sometimes made getting to a conclusion more difficult. For example, the killing of Sinwar. In the absence of Sinwar, where you had basically a single decider, that happened just at a point where we thought we might be able to bring this agreement over the finish line. All of a sudden, there's not a single decider and it's a lot harder to get a decision out of Hamas. So all of these actions have second- and third-order effects that you have to calculate. But fundamentally, look, one of the things that I found a little astounding throughout is that for all of the understandable criticism of the way Israel has conducted itself in Gaza, you hear virtually nothing from anyone since Oct. 7 about Hamas. Why there hasn't been a unanimous chorus around the world for Hamas to put down its weapons, to give up the hostages to surrender, I don't know what the answer is to that. Israel on various occasions, has offered safe passage to Hamas's leadership and fighters out of Gaza. Where is the world — where is the world in saying, Yeah, do that. End this. Stop the suffering of people that you brought on. Now, again, that doesn't absolve Israel of the way of its actions in conducting the war. But I do have to question how it is we haven't seen a greater sustained condemnation and pressure on Hamas to stop what it started and to end the suffering of people that it initiated. – I do want to ask you about your own standing in the department that you lead, because you've had a series of very public defections over the conduct at the State Department over Gaza. The latest to speak out is Mike Casey, who was the State Department's deputy political counselor on Gaza and resigned in July. He recently talked to The Guardian about his tenure, and he claimed that the State Department frequently rolled over for Israel, that no one would read his reports on civilian casualties. He said that he and his colleagues would joke that they could staple cash to the reports and still they would fall on deaf ears. That's very dark. How do you respond to that? – I have inordinate respect for the people in this department who've not only had different views of the policies that we've pursued, but have expressed those views, including in what's been a time-honored tradition of the department, which is something called a dissent channel cable. This is the ability of any officer in the department to send what we — a message, a memo, a cable to me reflecting their differences. And every single one of those winds up on my desk, every single one of those I read, every single one of those I respond to, including 20 or so on Gaza. And some, of course, have brought forward some of these facts. I didn't need to send channel cables to have the facts in front of me. I get them every single day. I read everything. I comment on everything. I look for answers on everything. Does that mean we get to the right answers every time? No, but does it mean we're intensely focused on it? Yes. And again, my goal has been to end this conflict in Gaza in a way that makes sure that Oct. 7 doesn't happen again, that ends the suffering of people and does it in an enduring way that brings the hostages home. – Do you think there are still hostages alive? – Yes. – Do you, Secretary Blinken, worry that perhaps you have been presiding over what the world will see as a genocide? – No. It's not, first of all. Second, as to how the world sees it, I can't fully answer to that. But they — everyone has to look at the facts and draw their own conclusions from those facts. And my conclusions are clear. I think, as well, there is, in the wake of this horrific suffering, the traumatization of an Israeli population, the Palestinian population and many others. There's also a light that one can see that offers the prospect of a much different and much better future. It doesn't bring back the lives of those who have been lost. It doesn't bring back the parents of the children in Gaza who've lost their parents, or the children for parents in Israel on Oct. 7 who lost theirs. But it does offer a different way forward, and we've done

an extraordinary amount of work to build the foundation for that. First, you've got to end the conflict in Gaza. And I believe it will end, and it will probably end more or less on the terms that we've established in the ceasefire agreement that President Biden put forward, that we got the whole world behind. It will land there. Second, you have to make sure it's enduring. We've spent months working on a post-conflict plan with many countries in the region, Arab partners in particular. And that plan is, if we don't have the opportunity to start to try to implement it through a hostage cease-fire agreement in the next couple of weeks, we will hand it off to the incoming Trump administration, and they can decide whether to move forward with it. Third, we have the prospect of a totally different region with normalized relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and many other countries, Israel integrated into the security architecture of the region, and, because it will be a requirement of any such normalization agreement, a real pathway to a Palestinian state. We've done all of the work to put that — put those plans in place. Normalization with Saudi Arabia, that can happen tomorrow based on the work that we've done, the investments we've made, once there is an end to the conflict in Gaza and an agreement on a credible pathway forward for the Palestinians. All of that work is there. That's what we'll be handing over. But it requires leaders to make really hard decisions, and it requires somehow moving beyond the trauma of two societies, Israeli and Palestinian, that we see and that have taken root. That's going to be the really hard part. – Your tenure, as we've said, has been filled with many complicated conflicts. At the same time, there's been a lot of reporting on President Biden's declining abilities over the course of his term. You are one of the closest people to him. You have worked with him for decades. By some accounts, he considers you a surrogate son. This is a delicate question to ask, but I do feel that many Americans want to understand if you saw changes from the man that you knew so well. – Look, here's what I can tell you. Look at everything we've done, everything I believe that we've achieved in this administration, at home and around the world. And whether you agree or not, I think there's a very strong record of achievement, historic in many ways. Every single one of those achievements has been the product of a decision that was made by the president of the United States, by President Biden, not by me, not by others in the administration, by the president. His judgment, his decision, his action has been reflected in what we've done, what we've achieved. That's the basis upon which to judge whether he's been an effective president. And I believe the answer is resoundingly yes. – Last summer, my colleague Robert Draper reported that people in the diplomatic corps worried that the president's memory, for example, was showing signs of slipping while he was meeting with foreign leaders. – Look, we all change. We all age. I have a 4, soon to be 5-year-old daughter. I was sitting with her the other day, and now four years in, and she was saying, Oh, Daddy's wearing a white shirt. He's got on a blue suit, he has black shoes and he has gray hair. And I said, No, no, no, my hair is brown. And she said, No, it's gray. We all get older, we all change as we get older. But again, what I've seen when it comes to judgment, when it comes to decisions that do right by the country, he's shown that judgment. He's made those decisions. – On a personal note, your own story is very much defined by this fight against autocracy. Your stepfather was a Holocaust survivor who was saved from the death camps by American soldiers. It's an incredible story. You've said that you learned lessons from him about what our country is and what it represents, and what it means when the United States is engaged in leading. And I'm wondering, as you look at the end of your tenure, as you've been leading over the last four years, and you're handing off, as we've discussed, many of these conflicts that are still unresolved, and you have come under a lot of criticism, do his lessons strike you differently now than they did before that you've been through the fire, so you will of really being the person at the forefront of making these very, very difficult choices? – My friend Tom Friedman wrote, a few months ago, a column that basically said, Parents, don't let your sons and daughters grow up to be secretary of state. It's a different world than it was when some of my predecessors were doing this. And I think at the heart of that is something I've seen over 32 years that I've been engaged in foreign policy, starting at the very beginning of the Clinton administration and now concluding with the Biden administration, which is that now and in recent years, there's been a greater multiplicity, a greater complexity, a greater interconnectedness of problems than ever before. And they're happening at a speed that we've never experienced before. And as a result, it's a

very different challenge. But some basic fundamentals haven't changed, at least for me. And, yes, it does go to the lessons that I learned from my stepfather, from my father and other relatives, almost all of whom came to this country as immigrants, as refugees fleeing oppression, fleeing the case of my stepfather, the war that and the Holocaust that eliminated his entire family. And each, in one way or another, finding themselves on our shores and having seen the United States as the last best hope, having come here, rebuilt their lives and flourished because this is the country that we are, that hasn't changed for me. My stepfather came to the United States after surviving the Holocaust, eventually made his way here and even served in the Kennedy administration. And back then, you could become an American by special act of Congress, which he was. So Congress passes an act and he became an American citizen. And I have — my family has that act. And he used to say, Never forget, I'm an American by choice. You're an American by accident of birth. And I take that very seriously, because what it means to me is there's an extraordinary responsibility that comes with being an American, a responsibility that comes from being part of the greatest country on Earth, and if you're in public service, as I've had the incredible privilege of being for 32 years, a responsibility to try to use that in the best way that you can, to do better by your fellow citizens but also people around the world. And every place I've been around the world, everything I've heard, even with criticism, intense criticism of our policies, is people want the United States involved. They want us engaged. They want us leading. They know that we're more likely to get to a solution when we're at the table than without us. – Secretary, thank you so much for your time, I appreciate it. – Great to be with you today. Thanks.

Antony Blinken Insists He and Biden Made the Right Calls

At the end of a tenure marked by war and division, the outgoing Secretary of State defends his legacy on Gaza and Ukraine, and says he's made America stronger.
By Lulu Garcia-Navarro
January 4, 2025