

Paul: [00:00](#) Ladies and gentlemen, angry Americans around the country and around the world, and uh, visitors and hosts from the Betaworks community, welcome to Angry Americans and welcome to another important, iconic, inspiring conversation with the great and powerful Yael Eisenstat. Please give her a round of applause everybody.

John: [00:23](#) (clapping)

Paul: [00:25](#) So for folks listening, we are at Betaworks, which is an exceptionally uh, exciting and dynamic community here on the West Side of New York. Thank you for- for hosting us. Um, we are on a cool stage surrounded, well kinda between two ferns actually. I don't know if this was intended, Zach Galifianakis fans will understand the reference. Um, but Yael, thank you for joining us. And thank you for being here and thank you for having this conversation with me, welcome.

Yael Eisenstat: [00:50](#) Thank you for having me. And again, I want you to do all my introductions for the rest of my life. It's very, very flattering.

Paul: [00:56](#) Yeah, well it's kinda exciting to be able to introduce you properly 'cause I feel like you probably had a real challenge introducing yourself for a long period of time, right?

Yael Eisenstat: [01:05](#) Yeah, actually. Some of my friends can attest, whenever people asked me like, "Who are you?" Or, "What do you do?" It's always I kinda fumble through it. I'm not great at introducing myself.

Paul: [01:14](#) W- we'll get into that in a second. One question I ask of everyone is what is your preferred uh, adult beverage of choice? And it's an insight into who you are and- and every guest. So I always ask what's your drink of choice? And can you tell us please what is your choice and- and why?

Yael Eisenstat: [01:29](#) Yeah. So I'm a vodka drinker. Um, I just drink my vodka straight on the rocks. Putting a little water in it tonight just to pace myself because you know, lots of people have tried to pour me more drinks to get my secrets out of me. So the water is to pace myself. But I'm a- I'm a vodka on the rocks kinda gal.

Paul: [01:48](#) Can I ask you, since you do have a background in the CIA, is there actually a class that you've taken that teaches you how to drink?

Yael Eisenstat: [01:54](#) There isn't. But the- the funny thing is, I actually didn't drink until I had no other options once I got my security clearance. I didn't start drinking 'till I joined the CIA.

Paul: [02:06](#) Ah.

Yael Eisenstat: [02:07](#) You can make what you want from that statement.

Paul: [02:10](#) But because you grew up in Northern California.

Yael Eisenstat: [02:12](#) I did grow up in Northern California.

Paul: [02:14](#) Right? So you, I- I- I imagine that you experienced all that Northern California has to offer growing up.

Yael Eisenstat: [02:19](#) I did experience all that Northern California ... (laughing).

Paul: [02:22](#) So, I- I wanna start there, Yael. How did- How did you go from Northern California to almost two decades working in the CIA? I know it was, you know, your life has been an incredible journey. But um, can you talk about what inspired you to end up in the CIA and how that came to be, please?

Yael Eisenstat: [02:40](#) Sure. Um, yeah, you sip, I'll sip after my intro story.

Paul: [02:44](#) Yeah.

Yael Eisenstat: [02:44](#) Uh, you know I grew up actually in the Silicon Valley, of all places. And um, from a very young age I- there was something about growing up in Paulo Alto and Los Altos Hills in that area, that there was something about it that just didn't completely mesh with who I was. From a very young age I had a global perspective, probably in part because my mom is not originally from the US. And I always wanted to see what was out there beyond just the little bubble I was living in. So decided very early on that I was gonna focus on international affairs, um and see what that led to.

Yael Eisenstat: [03:22](#) So I'll fast forward, and I spent a year of high school overseas, year of college overseas, and then went to DC for grad school. And uh, in 1999 when you graduate with, you know, master's in international affairs, back then you didn't think as much of what companies play this role [inaudible 00:03:39], you really think about government. Now, this is not the sexy CIA story people wanna hear. I really wanted to work at USAID or State Department, but they both had hiring freezes in 1999. 'Cause I

was like this, you know, weird, lefty, curly haired girl from California who just wanted to like go around the world and- and do great things and help, you know, work on foreign policy and figure out what the US's role in the world could be. Um, so those two places had hiring freezes. And someone's like, "Oh, you should just throw your resume in at the CIA." I was like, "Wow."

Yael Eisenstat: [04:12](#) That sounded scary. But I did. And oddly enough they called me right away. And this was before September 11th, so I went in. They still interviewed in the building at the time. And I went in and I interviewed and then went home that night and I was like, "That was really weird, I was just in the CIA." And just went out and partied all night with my friends. (laughing) And they called me at 8:00 the next morning when I was not very coherent and ready to be woken up by the phone. And they- they made an offer the next morning for exactly what I said I wanted to do. I said, I had spent some time in Africa, it was the part of the world that was the most interesting to me. And when I applied I did not apply to work at the CIA, I applied to work on African Affairs and African political issues. And that's what they offered.

Paul: [04:58](#) And can you go through that thought process? 'Cause I joined the military in 1998, right? And we thought maybe you'll go to Bosnia, there was no looming threat of Iraq and Afghanistan, there was no 9/11. So it's not the national security environment that young people are waking up to and- and launching into now. And I went from an elite liberal arts school in Western Massachusetts, Amherst College, which couldn't have been farther away from the army, than maybe Berkeley and the CIA. So can- can you talk about what you were thinking during that time period and the trajectory you thought it might take you on?

Yael Eisenstat: [05:34](#) Sure. Um, I mean this was a period of time, late-'90s, you know, you're post-Cold War, you're pre-September 11th. It is just kinda this what is the world gonna look like? How is the world gonna develop? What is the US's role gonna be in it? And those were all super interesting questions to me. And I mean, the first time I'd gone to Africa it was like throw a guitar on my back, go just play music. It was actually music and art that drew me to that part of the world to begin with. Um, so it really maybe was a little bit sort of wide eyed a little bit, just excited to really dig in on how the world is going to ... Again, it was a little bit of a weird time in the '90s. It was post-Cold War, Post-Berlin Wall coming down, not really knowing how the world's gonna turn out. It was all very exciting. So I just wanted to play a part in

that excitement and in understanding how different cultures can work together and how different people can work together. Um, so that was the thought process.

Paul: [06:37](#) And, I'm- there's a lot of elements of your experience that I wanna dig into. But two weeks ago a young 23-year-old army specialist was killed in Kenya. Most people in America don't even realize we have military forces in Kenya. We talk a lot in this show about the forever war and how many different places our military is engaged in on a daily basis that's often forgotten from the headlines. So can you give us your perspective on that? Uh, and uh, specifically the disconnect that exists between what our military and clandestine forces are doing in Kenya specifically and in Africa? Um, given that everyone is barely focused on Afghanistan or Iraq, much less Kenya.

Yael Eisenstat: [07:22](#) Yeah. Um, so I spent two years in Kenya as a foreign service officer. So over my career I worked for about four or five different government agencies. So I was in Kenya from 2004 to 2006 um, as a diplomat. And of the various roles I played there, uh one was the political military officer. So that meant that uh, I had to work with the US military there because- and if I get into too much detail just give me like the pull the ear or something.

Paul: [07:49](#) I will definitely not pull your ear.

Yael Eisenstat: [07:52](#) (laughing) okay. Um-

Paul: [07:52](#) You're one of the few people that could definitely kill me that I've interviewed. Most people I could take out, I think that you have the advantage here. So I'm not pulling on your ear-

Yael Eisenstat: [08:00](#) I meant pull your own ear, but okay, yes. Don't pull mine.

Paul: [08:02](#) I will trust- I will trust you, as I told you earlier, I will trust you to censor what you need to.

Yael Eisenstat: [08:07](#) Okay.

Paul: [08:08](#) For reasons of national security.

Yael Eisenstat: [08:09](#) Yes. So, um, what that meant is the US military ... listen, Kenya was not a combat zone. So that means that the military's not in charge, whereas in Afghanistan and Iraq they are. So you put a civilian like me, who has to work with the US military to really figure out everything that how we work with Kenyans and whatnot. So long story short, I spent a lot of time up in the

coastal part of Kenya, in particular spent a lot of time in this little area called Lamu. And it's- it's sort of the northern tip of the coastal part of Kenya, very close to Somalia, it shares a border with Somalia.

Yael Eisenstat: [08:41](#) And a lot of the work that I was doing in that part of the world was really, I mean, it's not a politically correct term, but a lot of it is the hearts and minds type of work. Right? It's building bridges with communities, um, while at the same time ... And the US military was also helping the Kenyans build up a coast guard. And was there to help the Kenyans figure out how to secure their own borders. So what happened a few weeks ... it was a few weeks ago, I think. Um, most people missed it, is that there was Al Shabaab, the terrorist group from Somalia had, this is pretty shocking, infiltrated the military base.

Paul: [09:16](#) Yep.

Yael Eisenstat: [09:16](#) That US military are sharing with the Kenyans in Lamu. And most people don't necessarily know that that base is there. So the fact that Al Shabaab was able to even attack that base, to me was shocking. Um, there were very conflicted reports in the beginning, including us not admitting if it had really been breached. Um, to me what was really important in that moment was to realize that ... There were a few things that were going on in my mind. One is wow, Al Shabaab has actually gained the capability to possibly breach a military base that the US is securing. Um, that's shocking. But two, it's also, I was a little bit concerned about how are we going to react to this? Because at the end of the day, we are there to help the Kenyans secure this part of their country, the Kenyans want us there, the Kenyans are dealing with a threat at their border.

Yael Eisenstat: [10:11](#) For me, I spent so much time with people in these different villages along that border there. And it's always the civilians that are gonna suffer if things escalate. It's always those people in those villages who are just happen by geographical unluckiness to be sitting right along that border there. And so I, anyway, I just wanted ... I was really nervous. It happened right after the Iran thing. Right?

Paul: [10:40](#) Yeah.

Yael Eisenstat: [10:40](#) It happened right after Soleimani.

Paul: [10:43](#) Yeah, that weekend, yeah.

- Yael Eisenstat: [10:43](#) And immediately you see ... Speaking of what we're gonna talk about in the min- in a minute, the amount of disinformation that starts to spread online. A lot of self-appointed experts start Tweeting that this must have something to do with Iran, that Al Shabaab was clearly paying the US back for us killing Soleimani. None of that is true. But that rhetoric starts to build up. And my concern is, does that become a talking point for this administration to take stronger action in Somalia that could really affect these populations? So that whole thing became very messy.
- Paul: [11:16](#) So it- it's kind of all been messy, especially over the last three years. Um, and you've- you've ... Right? I mean, and you've demonstrated courage time and time again. You know, your- your decision to step up to serve. But maybe, um, in- in my view one of the most courageous moments was when you chose to essentially out yourself as a CIA analyst, um, through a New York Times op ed. And I would like you to please share that story. And if you can take us through your thought process. In- in 2004 I came home from Iraq and was one of the first soldiers to publicly criticize the war opposite the president on a public stage.
- Paul: [11:53](#) So I remember in a very different way, what it was like to make that transition. You go across the Rubicon. And once you speak out, and- and mine was in a political speech opposite the president, and then 24 hours later was George Stephanopoulos on ABC. And you went through a similar run where you had the New York Times op ed and then all the- the major media sources. So can you take us through those days prior and what led you to that moment and why it was so important for you to speak out?
- Yael Eisenstat: [12:21](#) Sure. Um, what's really interesting is I- I had never planned to talk about my CIA past, publicly. It was never something I was trying to do, it was never something I planned to do. I had reinvented myself as a private citizen, which is harder than people realize when you come out of that world. And I had managed to do it. And um, it really started in late 2015 as I started watching the rhetoric heating up here ahead of the elections. And started getting more and more concerned, like a lot of people were, about this breakdown of civil discourse, what was going on. But it was that moment, so if you recall on inauguration day ... So, I went to the Women's March that day. It was the first moment in a number of months where I felt inspired and felt a little bit hopeful again.

Yael Eisenstat: [13:11](#) We all dealt with the elections in our own way. For me, I will be very honest, I actually felt betrayed by my country. I felt like this was the country I had served, this was the country I had done so much for. And in that moment I felt betrayed. So I was very down. And then the Women's March happened and I felt inspired for the first time in a long time. And I come home, my phone had been off all day, I come home and there's just like so many messages on my phone. "Did you see it? Did you see it? Did you see it?"

Yael Eisenstat: [13:39](#) So you may recall Trump made a speech on like day two or day one at the CIA in front of the Wall of Stars, which is the wall that commemorates people who died in service. And many of those stars don't even have names attached to them because they're classified. And it's, for the agency it's hallowed ground.

Paul: [14:04](#) It's like the CIA's Arlington.

Yael Eisenstat: [14:04](#) Yes.

Paul: [14:04](#) Yeah.

Yael Eisenstat: [14:04](#) Yeah.

Paul: [14:04](#) Yeah.

Yael Eisenstat: [14:04](#) And he gave this speech in front of the wall. And it wasn't just that he gave this speech, he had been, for me I was watching for months how he was denigrating the intelligence community. And whatever you think about the intelligence community, let me be clear, I never planned to be the great defender of the CIA when I left. I- that was never my goal. But the dangers of a president who intentionally denigrates the intelligence community and the so-called deep state, that is to me, a demonstration of what's to come. And that is right out of a dictator's playbook. So he stood up on that stage in front of the Wall of Stars and talked about his numbers at inauguration and went on and on and bragged about it. And- and like didn't even thank the men and women that were there. And it infuriated me.

Yael Eisenstat: [14:53](#) So that night I got really, really angry. Angry Americans. I was an Angry American that night. And I just started writing. And then I had a phone call with one of the reporters that had been at the CIA that day. And everybody- and he knew my background and he wanted to get a quote from me. And I kinda yelled at him, "You shouldn't have even been there." Press should not be at

the CIA when a president gives a speech there. I had been there when Vice President Biden had given a speech there. That is the one place you come just to tell the men and women who work there how important their work is. Because nobody will ever know their names. And so actually the night before my New York Times piece, he asked me what I thought about it.

Yael Eisenstat: [15:34](#)

And he said, "Well what do you think about the standing ovation that Trump is now bragging about on TV?" And I said, "Well of course he got a standing ovation, the men and women of the CIA do not sit down in front of their commander in chief until told to do so. And I watched it, he never told them to sit." And he said, "Can I quote you on that?" And I hadn't said anything publicly yet. And that was the moment where it was, to me, me protecting my past was less important than being able to really help people understand what was going on. So I said, "You can quote me on the record." In his defense, most journalists would be like, "Awesome, bye." Click. (laughing) right?

Yael Eisenstat: [16:12](#)

And he asked me, he said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Yeah, 'cause this is way bigger than me." And then I wrote the piece that night and in the New York Times the next day the op ed came out talking about the star on the wall behind the president that represented my colleague that had died overseas. Which by the way, that star had been classified. It wasn't 'till I looked it up online that I realized his star had been declassified at that point and I could tell his story. So I felt like honoring his story in that piece as well. But, just to quickly sum up, the thought process that night. For me, I had carried the secret for 17 years. Right? I mean, very few people knew this about my past. They probably assumed and they probably guessed, but I didn't say it out loud. For me the secret was actually bigger than it needed to be. 'Cause for me to tell the entire world, especially in the New York Times about-

PART 1 OF 3 ENDS [00:17:04]

Yael Eisenstat: [17:03](#)

'Cause for me to tell the entire world, especially in the New York Times, about that part of my past was scarier than anything I'd ever done. It was scarier than having guns pointed at me, it was scarier than anything I had done along s-, like, in scary parts of the world. And you know what? I woke up the next day and I was still alive, and in a way I unburdened that secret.

Paul: [17:22](#)

It- it's- it's an incredibly important story of courage and patriotism. I think it w- was a time when the president had just



started to politicize the intelligence community and the national security apparatus and now it's become a standard playbook. When he rolled out his statement on Soleimani, he had the chairman of the joint chiefs and the army chief of staff flanking him in a way that you don't see in America, you don't see a civilian commander in chief walk out and say, "Look at my guns." Right? Which is what he's done, but he's also very shrewdly, um, cannibalized that political power, 'cause he knows that in many ways, you know, troops, veterans, national security folks are the ultimate populace issue.

Paul: [18:03](#) But- but you really have spoken, Yael, effectively about the fear. But can you talk about maybe that 24, 48 hours afterward where you have this kind of, it's gotta be an out-of-body experience? Um, you know, I had Mayor Pete Buttigieg on the show a couple weeks ago and I asked him, you know... You were relatively unknown eight months ago. Now you're world famous. But you were a- a- a covert asset for the CIA and then you're sitting on CNN. What is that 24 hours like for you and calls from your family or people from college saying, "Holy shit. You're in the CIA?" Like what- what- what is that like for- for you as a human being?

Yael Eisenstat: [18:41](#) I feel like I need to start by saying I was not a covert asset-

Paul: [18:43](#) Thank you.

Yael Eisenstat: [18:43](#) ... just before the (laughs)-

Paul: [18:43](#) Thank you.

Yael Eisenstat: [18:43](#) ... before the industry gets mad at me, but- (laughs)

Paul: [18:46](#) Thank you for the clarification. I appreciate that.

Yael Eisenstat: [18:48](#) Um, but it's actually funny, I was supposed to have dinner with a few friends that night and I emailed them, I was in my pajamas, under a blanket, on my couch. That was (laughs) actually how I spent that day. And I- I decided day one, don't look at so-, don't, just don't. Don't look at social media, don't read the emails. And then I said to them, "Can we have dinner as close to my house as possible tonight? 'Cause something's going to drop at 3:00 PM and I don't know how I'm going to feel by dinnertime." They're like, "Okay."

Yael Eisenstat: [19:16](#) So we went to dinner and by that point, it had hit and, uh, I didn't pay attention the first day. And when the second round

of drinks were ordered and I was like, "Well, it's not like I'll go on CNN tomorrow, so bring it on," 'cause I just did not want to be a news person. I didn't want to be the story. So we drank way too much that night and then at 5:00 AM, the emails from every major network start coming in and I said no. I didn't want to do it. And friends of mine who are still in government are the ones who convinced me to go on CNN the next day, 'cause they said, "You're speaking for people who can't speak right now."

Yael Eisenstat: [19:56](#)

And so they, in a way, put that weight on me, but um, that, if you (laughs) ever see that CNN interview, you can tell how uncomfortable I am in it and it's not that I'm uncomfortable with speaking, I'm uncomfortable with ever feeling like I'm exploiting any part of my past for anything that looks like self-promotion, but to me it was so important to help Americans understand. We all are so bombarded with so much information right now, to me I really wanted to help people understand when you have a president that is intentionally degrading the very people that whether you like them or not and however you feel about the intel community or the military, at the end of the day they're still the ones that are going to keep you safe when the shit hits the fan.

Yael Eisenstat: [20:43](#)

So I was going through all that. And then there's the funny moments where I finally resurfaced and get online and like, ex-boyfriends are like, "Oh, hey." (laughs) I was like, "Oh yeah, sorry. Forgot to mention that part." And so like, it got weird. It got weird after that.

Paul: [20:57](#)

Yes, it's going to make a great movie one day. Um, but t- take us, um, I- I want to stay on a moment that you shared that I think's important for people to understand. The um, the- the- the national intelligence community can often seem like this monolith, but part of your motivation was sharing this story of your colleague that was represented on the wall by the star. Can you share that story? Tell us who that colleague was and why it was important that he be memorialized with a star on that wall?

Yael Eisenstat: [21:26](#)

Sure. Um, you're going to see me going through what is public and what is not in my brain right now. Um, this was a colleague that I had met while I was in Ethiopia. Um, and he was killed in Ethiopia. And what I remember, in- in addition to, and- and I think I wrote about this in the piece, when I worked with him in Ethiopia a little bit, not worked with him, but when I met him when I was there traveling for work, he and I never, I don't know if he was a Republican or a Democrat, I don't know if he

was conservative or liberal, I don't know about any of his political leanings. I know that he was absolutely dedicated to his work, to national security of our country and he was just a really freaking cool guy. His name was Gregg Wenzel.

Yael Eisenstat: [22:17](#) And I just remember when we had the memorial service for him at the agency, and his name wasn't public, there's a star and it just says anonymous because he hadn't been declassified yet. And I remember sitting there, watching his parents at the memorial service, and I remember thinking, "These parents just lost a son who," by the way, the important thing to know about him, he was, he was a law student, I think he was a lawyer. He could've gone off and made a lot of money as a lawyer, and decided that this was what he wanted to do instead. And I watched his parents knowing he's classified. You're never going to be able to tell anybody why he really died. You won't even be able to tell anybody he died in Ethiopia.

Yael Eisenstat: [23:57](#) That was really heartbreaking. Um, so he is just, to me, one of those people who in addition to j-, I mean, he's a smart ass, h-, we just like, we joked, we had fun, we... He's one of those guys that if he was sitting up here you would all want to have a drink with him, but you would know nothing about him. So to me, it was also really important to just make- make it human, make people understand that that star is a human being that you might have actually really liked, and he's being denigrated right now because of the president standing in front of his star, lying about the numbers of people who showed up at his inauguration, and even just to point out, he- he pointed at everybody in the CIA that day and said, "How many of you voted for me?"

Paul: [23:42](#) Right. Right.

Yael Eisenstat: [23:44](#) Let that sink in. The president pointed at the men and women in the CIA and said, "Who here voted for me?"

Paul: [23:52](#) So I think there are a lot of folks inside the CIA, whether they can be open about it or not, who are frustrated to say the least, probably angry about the state of affairs and about leadership. But this is question I ask of- of all of our guests, so Yael Eisenstat, what makes you angry?

Yael Eisenstat: [24:09](#) Well, that could take the rest of the podcast. (laughs) Um, so I'll just narrow it down to two things. One, 'cause I told you this back there, what will make me angry is if I have something in my teeth and my friends don't tell me. Like, that will end our

friendship. Just it's very clear, if there's spinach in my teeth and you do not tell me, 'cause we did a teeth check before I came out. Um, and two, there's so many things, but to me one of the things is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy really pisses me off. Um, if you and I have different viewpoints on things, if we have different political ideas, if we have different perspectives, I'm fine with all of that. But if you're hypocritical about it, that infuriates me.

Paul: [24:57](#) Un- under- understandably. I don't think you're a person that anyone wants to piss off, and- and now you're, um, in this new role where you are a voice for the voiceless. You're an advocate, you're an educator. But again, going back to your roots, you grew up in Northern California. Another question I ask of- of all of our guests, Yael, what was your first car?

Yael Eisenstat: [25:20](#) So my first car was supposed to be this weird little peach-colored Datsun we called the Peachy Car. Um, but my babysitter crashed it right before my 16th birthday, and I was going to get like, the clunker Peachy Car Datsun. So my first car ended up being a nicer (laughs) Honda Civic, which then, a year later, a woman ran a stop sign and it got crashed and totaled and broke my femur, like it was terrible. Almost died. (laughs) But so that's two cars in a row.

Paul: [25:53](#) What color, what c-, what color was that second car?

Yael Eisenstat: [25:54](#) Uh, the second car was a gray Honda Civic. Yeah.

Paul: [25:58](#) There's never a boring answer to that question, so those of you who are new to this podcast, like why is he asking her about her freaking car? There's almost always an interesting story and that's a new one.

Yael Eisenstat: [26:07](#) It changed the whole trajectory of my life too.

Paul: [26:09](#) It did?

Yael Eisenstat: [26:10](#) I was 17, I had different ideas of what I wanted to do with my life. I'm going to keep that one though a little bit internal right now. But the broken femur, the metal rod down my leg, there were reasons why I couldn't do what I actually wanted to do, so I ended up at the CIA instead. (laughs)

Paul: [26:26](#) And-

Yael Eisenstat: [26:27](#) Yeah.

- Paul: [26:28](#) Later, you end up at Facebook.
- Yael Eisenstat: [26:30](#) Yes. (laughs)
- Paul: [26:31](#) Um, which is an interesting, you know, transition from- from public service and the- the national intelligence industry, um, you also were very vocal in- in the way you departed Facebook. Can you explain for folks who may be new to your experience what you were hired to do or what you thought you were going to do and why you left?
- Yael Eisenstat: [26:54](#) Sure. So (laughs) I- I left government in 2013, and my biggest goal was to figure out who the biggest, baddest corporation in the world who is having profound impacts on the world was and help them think through how to work with local communities better, particularly in Africa. In 2013, that wasn't Facebook yet. It- it, oddly enough, was ExxonMobil, which is where I ended up for two years. (laughs) Heading their corporate social responsibilities strategy. But then in 2015, 2016, I started writing about the breakdown in civil discourse. Um, actually wrote this piece exploring why was it easier for me to engage with suspected extremists and terrorists along the Somalia border than it is for me to talk to Americans now on the opposite side of a political issue, and if that's happening to me, what does that mean for the future of our democracy?
- Yael Eisenstat: [27:46](#) So I s-, I wrote that in Time Magazine, start really digging in on what's going on. Like what is exacerbating this polarization that's always existed here? And so of course it takes me to starting to look at social media. So just as I'm getting asked to keynote big tech conferences to talk about this, Facebook calls. Um, and long story short, we went through a long process, um, because I am not taking a job because I want the free kombucha. If I'm taking this job, it's because I think you are a fundamental threat to our democracy right now, although I also love certain things about Facebook. I love how you have allowed me to stay connected to my friends around the world.
- Yael Eisenstat: [28:31](#) If you are offering me the opportunity to come in and really help diagnose this problem and try to help fix it, then great. So they offered me a very shiny title, um, that spoke to... (laughs) It's almost like they purposely spoke to the core of the type of person I am and they offered me this title of head of global elections integrity operations. Uh-
- Paul: [28:55](#) Might- might appear to be an oxymoron in and of itself to most people.

Yael Eisenstat: [28:58](#) Right. Uh, and- and to be clear, the other thing they didn't really explain very well during the interview process is that's within business integrity, which is a part of Facebook that is really responsible for everything they monetize, which means political ads. Um, they made the offer, the final offer one minute after Zuckerberg's hearing ended on the hill, if we all remember that fun Senate hearing. Um, I pushed back with all my don't hire me if you don't mean it. This is who I am. Don't make this offer if you don't want me to come in and do this job.

Yael Eisenstat: [29:32](#) Uh, so I was very clear. And I went in with the best intentions of I still love the idea of a platform like Facebook, and yes, I want to help this company figure out how to not destroy democracy. Uh, but I was just never empowered to do anything. So I mean, on day two, they took my title away, they told me I was not going to have... 'Cause they told me I'd get to hire my own team, they told me that it was up to me how many people that... Like they gave, they made every promise that I asked for, and then took that all away on day two.

Yael Eisenstat: [30:07](#) Now just to be really clear, I want to be really clear on this, I can only speak to my experience and my experience was in the business integrity work. Had I been hired into a different part of Facebook, I don't know, maybe it would've been different. But unfortunately that was my situation. So a few months later, um, and but I did, so I also immediately knew (laughs) okay, well then I'd better learn as much as I can while I'm still here. (laughs) Um, listen, you don't hire a former CIA officer and then tell me not to look under the rugs. Like that's just, that's your own fault.

Paul: [30:38](#) Right.

Yael Eisenstat: [30:38](#) That's just kind of stupid to think that's not how I'm going to operate. Um, to me it was really important to learn how did we get here in order to fix it. And I really felt like nobody wanted me to talk about how did we get here. And that's what an enlist would do, they would analyze how did we get here in order to fix it, right? Um, so to be clear, there were lots of employees there who were super excited I was there who were thirsty for someone to help them think differently through it. Um, the layers above me were not, and so I told them a few months later, "You hired me to do this. I'm not empowered to do this. Either you find me somewhere within this company to do the work you hired me to do or I'm out."

- Yael Eisenstat: [31:25](#) And they did not find me that place to do that, and so a few months later... I mean, the- the irony, I've never said this out loud, I don't know if I quit or if I was fired. (laughs) Because I laid down the marker of I give you two months to figure out how to empower me or I'm out and they did not, so there you go.
- Paul: [31:42](#) That's like most members of Trump's cabinet that have left. (laughs) They don't know if they've been fired or they quit either. But at it, at, at it's core, Yael, who has more information about the average American, the CIA or Facebook?
- Yael Eisenstat: [31:55](#) I mean, obviously Facebook because we give it up voluntarily. So I think one of thing people don't understand about the CIA as much as you think that the deep state and the almighty are tracking your every move, the CIA really doesn't give a shit about most of you in this room. Don't take that in a negative way. They just don't. Like, the CIA is actually looking at foreign information and foreign threats and whatnot. The FBI is a different story, but um, the CIA doesn't care about any of you unless you are somehow connected to a foreign terrorist organization that's plotting here.
- Yael Eisenstat: [32:24](#) Facebook, you guys give it all up. Like, you, they- they- they know way more about you but that's kind of our own faults, too.
- Paul: [32:32](#) So yeah, you created a, um, a- a paper recently with John and, um, a number of other technology leaders here at Betaworks on, um, kind of what you'd like to see Facebook change to help democracy. I'm paraphrasing, y- you can maybe help me on that. But for especially folks who aren't as close to it who aren't deeply entrenched in the technology community, can you be an an- an analyst for us? Identify the problem and recommend your solution for the best interest of our democracy.
- Yael Eisenstat: [33:01](#) Sure. So there's two things. The- the paper we did together with John and Chris and a number of people, um, it was the immediate things the company can do ahead of our 2020 elections. I'm going to back up before I get to that one and say short of all the things I'd actually like to see done, so there's the pragmatist of here's what you can do and here's some things that should not be terribly difficult for Facebook to debate to get done, but on a higher level before we get to that is government has to step up.
- Yael Eisenstat: [33:36](#) We have a platform that basically, for me it's always been about the business model. You have a company, and- and I don't want

to make it just about Facebook, there are other companies that do this, but that is where I worked so that is where my firsthand experience is from. You have a company that uses our human behavioral data, which we hand over but it's still not totally transparent about how much they track us all-

PART 2 OF 3 ENDS [00:34:04]

Yael Eisenstat: [34:03](#) ... totally transparent about how much they track us all over the internet, but they're using our human behavioral data to categorize us and to segment us into different categories. Why? So that they can, like, set us up to be targeted with these personal ads that make us all feel a little better because, oh, they made my life so much easier. They're sending me the ads I want to see. They're showing me the content I want to see. Personalization, customization. That sounds great. It's just so much easier.

Yael Eisenstat: [34:35](#) But with that human behavioral data, what we're n-, like, they are literally (laughs) able to take that same data, which might work if they're sending you a Nike ad instead of a, I don't know, whatever other ad because, hey, I actually like Nike more. Great. That's fine. I really don't care about that. But those same tools are being used by people, like politicians, and like people who want to actually divide us for their own geopolitical purposes, such as the Russians. They get those same exact tools that Nike's getting, and the danger there is that ... Let's back up a sec. Polarization, anger, mistrust, political rhetoric. That's always been a part of the American landscape, right? I'm not ... None of that's new. And the media has always been hyper divisive, and all of that, but these tools that allow them to segment us into these different categories and then target us with ads ...

Yael Eisenstat: [35:35](#) And- and, don't forget, in order to do that, they have to keep you on their screen as long as humanly possible. So what does that mean? That means their algorithms end up optimizing for keeping you engaged, and you are more likely to remain engaged if the next thing you see is a little more salacious than the last thing you saw. So it's- I'm not going to get into the whole filter bubble conversation. Hopefully, most of you are already well familiar with that. But why is the filter bubble thing so dangerous? Because not only is it breaking down our ability to recognize that people who do not necessarily fit our perception of what is right in the world are not necessarily evil. It pushes us further and further into these extreme mindsets, and they're doing it all to keep you engaged so that they can sell



us ads. And why does that matter for elections and what we're talking about now? Is because then politicians can come in, and they can hyper-target us with their ads.

Yael Eisenstat: [36:42](#) The two of you, I'm just pointing at two people, might both live in New York, might even live across the street from each other, and it is very possible you are shown two totally different versions of a political ad from the same politician. So how can the two of you then have a conversation about what you just saw, and debate how you feel about it? You can't, because you're not even seeing the same version of truth. And so those are the tools that are super dangerous to me, and those are the things that I would like to see regulated. And we can talk about, or I can ... I've written about that.

Yael Eisenstat: [37:17](#) But so separate from the government actually getting their act together, and- and they're trying, but this is ... I get it. It's complicated. They're not going to get it figured out in time for our election. So that's where John and Chris pulled together this very interesting group of people who all have really inside knowledge of how these things work to say here are some things we can do short of regulating you that you, as a platform, can choose to stand up and do to protect our elections.

Paul: [37:46](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative). It's- it's kind of a 10 point plan, and for folks listening on the podcast, we'll post it at [angryamericans.us](#), and you can read up and share and advocate for the change that I think is common sense. But, yeah, there's been kind of a through line throughout your career, and it's that you're a guardian for America. Really. At a time when we need more guardians. I've- I've spoken at times ... A friend of mine, um, who was both in the clergy and in the military said once that if America were a religion, the military would be like the clergy, or the ones that are supposed to uphold the values, be the samurai, the keepers of the flame, right? To protect, uh, the country beyond the political influences. But it's this time where people like you, or you in particular, you've stepped up in the CIA, you've stepped up again, you keep stepping up. But you've also redefined patriotism, and I think that's important right now, given the way this President has co-opted it and manipulated it. So can you just share for- for a second your thoughts on what patriotism means in this moment?

Paul: [38:50](#) And especially given your background, because a- a lot of folks, and we're in New York City, um, sometime the, quote-unquote, "coastal elites" or the technology community can feel very far away from national security and defense. And- and there's this

constant friction that I've seen working in- in the valley and working in other places where, um, folks just don't know how to reconcile their issues with the President or with the policy, and their national security imperative on some levels. So can you share with us your thoughts on what does patriotism mean for you right now?

Yael Eisenstat: [39:22](#) Yeah. That was a big question. Um, it's interesting. Growing up, I never identified with the word "patriotism." Even when I served, I didn't identify with the word, because to me, the word always meant pin-wearing, flag-waving, bravado. All these things that I didn't identify with. And it- it had been co-opted by a certain part of our society as this thing that just didn't feel like it was me.

Yael Eisenstat: [39:48](#) So fast forward to today. The reason I decided to stand up and write that piece about Trump, and more recently ... Listen, going up against Mark Zuckerberg is not necessarily easier than going up against Trump. These are powerful people, and Zuckerberg probably knows more about me than Trump does if he wants to, right? But to me, it was actually both our current president, and unfortunately, oddly enough, some of the things that we were seeing happening in the social media world, to me, are both actual threats to the core of who we are supposed to be as Americans. This idea of dividing us for profit, dividing us into echo chambers, making us hate our neighbors as opposed to realizing I don't need to agree with you, but at least we can recognize we have a common, shared interest in making our country better. That's- that's falling apart, and it's falling apart because companies are profiting off of that divisiveness.

Yael Eisenstat: [40:51](#) So, to me, I actually feel more patriotic now than I did when I was serving in government because I actually ... Listen, I don't gain a lot by standing up and shouting these things. Actually, this- this woman ... I- I don't normally do this, but I really recommend reading this piece, and it sounds self-serving because I'm in the piece, but this woman, Rachel [Slaar 00:41:15], wrote a piece recently in the Washington Post about the Cassandras. And it was about the women who have been really trying to highlight some of these problems for the last decade, and people weren't listening to it. And I thought about ... And- and I'm in it, and I thought about it, and I never thought of myself as the Cassandra. And you can look up your mythology if you don't know what the Cassandra is. But that is the patriotic thing, right? It is ... I truly believe if we get to the point where we are so divided that we don't actually think we will ever solve some of our problems, then the great American experiment is

over because that's all we have is this idea that the next generation will always have more than the previous generation, right? If we don't even believe that we can figure out how to come together and have those conversations with people anymore, than what are we fighting for anymore?

Yael Eisenstat: [42:04](#) So, to me, it's my p- ... I ... Writing the piece about Facebook that I wrote last month, um, in the Washington Post and standing up against Trump in the New York Times, those, to me, felt like, listen, it's not fun. I get a lot of hate. You get the alt-right after you. You get the anti-Semites after you. Like, it happens. This is no gain to me. But I felt like I had to do it.

Paul: [42:26](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative). And you've inspired, I think, more folks than you'll know, especially young people who are considering a way to serve, and finding alternative ways to serve. It's interesting to say you thought about other ways to serve, because I was kind of down to AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, Marine Corps. That was actually the ones that I was looking at, and trying to figure out a way to serve.

Paul: [42:46](#) But I think you still bring an optimism, and you still, um, bring positivity to this discussion, and that's part of your teaching. So my- my final question for you, Yaël, is what makes you happy?

Yael Eisenstat: [42:59](#) First of all, the fact that you say I bring an optimism. Uh, I'll give two answers to that, because it's funny, a friend at a dinner that she hosted once recently introduced me at the table as the most optimistic person she knows. I was like, are you fricking kidding me? I'm the one who's always screaming about the house being on fire, and how everything's, like, falling apart. How can you call me optimistic? And she said, "Because you wouldn't keep fighting if you didn't think there was anything to fight for."

Yael Eisenstat: [43:24](#) So, just ... That made me happy, you also saying I'm optimistic, because I still don't think of myself that way.

Yael Eisenstat: [43:31](#) Um, another thing that makes me happy, super random, is, um, there's this place in New York City, and I actually went there last night with a friend. There's this place in New York City called Marie's Crisis. And you might think this is funny, and where am I going with this. It is this Broadway musical piano bar in the Village, rather iconic. I love going there because I'm a nerd and I love singing Broadway tunes. (laughs) There's a little confession. But, more importantly, Marie's Crisis ... I went there on a few of my darkest moments, uh, in the last several years.

Yael Eisenstat: [44:07](#) There was one night in particular. I think it might've been the night that Comey had just been fired, or it was something that, for those of us in the national security world ... Like, I know a lot of people freaked out about it, but for those of us from that world, it was really a dramatic moment. And I walk into Marie's Crisis, and I sit there with my cocktail at the bar, and I'm just pissed, and I'm angry. And I'm watching a bar full of people from all walks of life, old, young, like super fashionable, not, beautiful, not, fat, skinny, everything. And they're all just singing, and they are so fricking happy, and they're doing what they love. And there's something about that place that reminds me that this is why I'm fighting, because these people are so freaking happy singing Broadway tunes. I know that was a weird answer-

Paul: [44:55](#) No, it's not.

Yael Eisenstat: [44:55](#) But Marie's Crisis makes me really happy.

Paul: [44:57](#) It's not. I- I think especially folks who've been overseas in harm's way, you need those things back home to remember, and to inspire you, and to ground you. And when the shit gets really real over there, you hope that they're back there singing Broadway tunes.

Yael Eisenstat: [45:13](#) Yeah.

Paul: [45:14](#) You do. It- It's a r- it- it's the- it's the really weird situation, especially because we're so interconnected through technology. You can go out on a combat patrol, and then FaceTime your kids afterward. That is a total mind fuck. That is very different for this generation, and something previous generations didn't have to deal with. But I think that your, um, connection to those moments are really important. And especially the way you've put a human face on this world of the intelligence community that is being, I think, diminished and disrespected in a way that is so dangerous, not just for the individuals, but for our country and for the future.

Paul: [45:46](#) So you've been i- i- immeasurably courageous. Um, and the last thing I will do is a part of every show, and then we're going to come out into the audience and take your questions. So please get them ready. Thank you for bearing with us. But, uh, we do a giving of the gifts. And in recognition, um, of your leadership and your courage, you've kind of been a guardian at the gates in many ways. So every show ... If you guys are new, I'm going to

fill you in ... We give three kinds of gifts. So the first I have- we have for Yaël is, um, some Angry Americans merchandise-

Yael Eisenstat: [46:13](#)

Yes!

Paul: [46:13](#)

Which is made in the USA by veterans of Oscar Mike. And if you're feeling particularly angry, you can wear that out, or wear it to a party at Zuckerberg's house or something.

Yael Eisenstat: [46:24](#)

I don't get invited to these private dinners he's doing.

Paul: [46:27](#)

You might now, or you might not. I don't know. We- we'll talk to some folks in this room.

Paul: [46:31](#)

And the second part ... So the show started back in Easter, and we've asked this of every single guest, and this is kind of something the CIA, uh, analyst might- might be interesting to ask in particular. So there are three colors of Peeps, your marshmallow favorites from Easter: Yellow, blue, and pink. Yaël, which color do you choose and why?

Yael Eisenstat: [46:51](#)

So I'm going to have to go with yellow, but not just because I believe that was the original Peep color. Um, also growing up, I was such a tomboy, and my entire room was pink, and it really pissed me off that girls had to be pink and boys had to be blue. So that's why I go with the yellow.

Paul: [47:08](#)

It's a great answer. There- there are no bad answers. Sarah Jessica Parker called them "The OG of Peeps," and so you're in- you're in good standing.

Paul: [47:15](#)

And then, lastly, so, uh, we talk a bit about whiskey on the show, and each show, uh, I go to a liquor store and try to find something that speaks to me about the individual that we will be having a conversation with. So if you don't mind opening that, I can hold your mic for you, but there's a- a bit of a story behind it. And next time you go out and sing show tunes, or if Comey gets fired again-

Yael Eisenstat: [47:37](#)

Ooh, it's pretty.

Paul: [47:39](#)

So it's called, uh, Heaven's Door, and it's a- it's a creation of Bob Dylan.

Yael Eisenstat: [47:44](#)

Oh. Wow.

Paul: [47:44](#) And maybe you not know this, but I've been listening to a lot of Bob Dylan in- in the past, and, uh, Bob Dylan famously wrote Watchtower. Everybody knows that Hendrix performed Watchtower, but Bob Dylan wrote it. And I think in these times that feel ominous and, at times, folks feel hopeless, there- there are guardians along the watchtower. And I think you- you've been a guardian for America's watchtower for many years, and most times, you could never admit it, even to people close to you. And to hold that is- is, in my view, selfless service and leadership and integrity and patriotism that we need now more than ever. So we are very, very grateful for your leadership-

Yael Eisenstat: [48:22](#) You're going to make me cry. (laughs)

Paul: [48:22](#) And for your courage, and for what you're going to do in the future, because you're just getting started. So, ladies and gentlemen, a round of applause for the great Yaël Eisenstat.

Yael Eisenstat: [48:30](#) Thank you.

Paul: [48:34](#) Thank you.

PART 3 OF 3 ENDS [00:48:37]