

# “We Want To Negotiate” with Joel Simon

SEASON 2  
episode one

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Nick Lemann

Hello, Underreported listeners. Welcome back to season two of our show. I'm Nick Lemann. I lead a book imprint called Columbia Global Reports at Columbia University in New York City, where I'm also a professor and director of Columbia World Projects.

We started Columbia Global Reports almost five years ago at the suggestion of our very journalism friendly president of Columbia University, Lee Bollinger, who felt accurately that major mainstream news organizations have pulled back on their coverage of the international scene, and wanted to do something from within the university to help fill the gap. That's what we've been doing. We've published 19 books so far with a bunch more on the way.

You may have noticed that aside from a few bonus episodes, we took time off from podcasting this fall. While we've been away, our Columbia Global Reports team was hard at work publishing three new books that you may have seen. First, *Saudi America: The Truth About Fracking and How It's Changing the World*, by Bethany McLean. That came out in September. Second, *The Nationalist Revival: Trade, Immigration and the Revolt Against Globalization*, by John Judis, which came out in October. And third, *the Curse of Bigness: Antitrust in the New Gilded Age* by Tim Wu, which came out in November of 2018.

Each of these writers will be joining us later in the season, as well as other friends of the show. As always, we'll focus on sharing stories you aren't already hearing about, and connecting them to the current news whenever we can. To kick things off, today's guest is Joel Simon, who's here in the studio with me. Hi, Joel.

Joel Simon

Great to be here.

Nick Lemann

Thank you for being here. Joel is the executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists. He's written widely on media issues, contributing to *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Slate*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Guardian*.

Over his nearly two decades at the Committee, Joel has worked on dozens of hostage cases and led numerous international missions to advance press freedom around the world. His new book is *We Want to Negotiate: The Secret World of Kidnapping, Hostages, and Ransom*. And it's out now wherever you buy books.

Joel, let's start just by telling our audience what drew you to this subject. You know, we've known each other a long time, but I thought of you as a press freedom guy and not a hostage guy. What got you into hostages as a topic?

Joel Simon

Yeah, no, I'm a press freedom guy. And sadly, when you're a press freedom guy, sometimes you have to deal with hostage issues. And over the course of a couple of decades at the Committee to Protect Journalists, I've seen journalists taken hostage around the world and sometimes killed. I think everyone's familiar with the Danny Pearl case. He was kidnapped in 2001 in Pakistan, the Wall Street Journal reporter, and eventually beheaded.

So, sadly, I've had some experience dealing with these kinds of issues. But in the course of my time at CPJ, I had never seen anything like what happened in Syria. And this began in really the summer of 2013. At least that's when we started noticing that many journalists were just vanishing while they were reporting in Syria. And we actually didn't know what had become of them.

And at some point, one of those journalists, a journalist who we all know now, named Jim Foley, I had met him briefly and he was well known to people on our staff. And in the summer of 2014, I got a call from David Rohde, who's a New York Times reporter, who was also kidnapped in Pakistan. And he said that Jim's parents, Diane and John, wanted to meet me because they had decided that they wanted to try and raise a ransom to bring home their son. And they asked for my help. We had a meeting at the office. And I wanted to do everything I could to help them. Obviously, he was, as I mentioned, somebody I knew, and I felt it was part of my job as a defender of journalists.

But there were a lot of challenges. There were some just questions that I had in my own mind about the ethics of this, the legality. And also CPJ internally had a policy of, let's call it, discouraging the payment of ransom, because we believed that paying ransom could lead to additional kidnapping, making it more dangerous for journalists.

Well, we all know how the Foley case ended, tragically, was with Jim's beheading. And another journalist, Steven Sotloff, and a number of other hostages were also killed. And after this had happened, Diane Foley, Jim's mother, came to me and she told me, "You know, I appreciate the help, but I felt you could have done more." And I had a conversation with her, an honest conversation about my concern about paying ransom. And she said, well, "How do you know that? How do you know that paying ransom actually leads to more kidnapping?" European countries pay ransom. How do you know that it's the best strategy not to pay?" And I said, "You know, Diane, it seems so obvious to me that this is true, but I've never really looked at it." And I said, I think as a journalist, I have an obligation to really dig down and understand the debate around this issue. And that was the genesis of this book.

Nick Lemann

Before we get into the larger point, I just want to go back on the Jim Foley case, because I think – this is not a secret and it's in the book – but it may not be familiar to Americans who followed the case, not super closely, and think of him as having been kidnapped and held hostage and then beheaded along with Sotloff. Foley was being held with a large number, or a large-ish number of other people. So could you tell us who they were and what happened to them?

Joel Simon

Yeah. So when the situation changed in Syria, there was a period where the rebels fighting the Assad regime actually welcomed journalists and other humanitarian aid workers and other international figures, and provided some protection for them because they wanted to document the atrocities committed by the Assad regime.

But really, sometime in 2013, you started to see the rise of hardline jihadist elements linked to al Qaeda, and they had a different view of these international figures operating in Syria, and they began to target them. And they just began to vanish and to disappear.

At first, we didn't know what was happening. But eventually the Islamic State, a new group, sort of emerged, and it became obvious that they had been carrying out these targeted kidnappings. And in their custody, they had several dozen Westerners, international figures. Some were journalists, some were aid workers, a variety of different people in Syria for a variety of different reasons. And they were from a variety of different countries. Some were from the United States, some were from the United Kingdom, but many were from European countries. Italy, Spain, France, Denmark, Germany

And at this time, these different countries had different policies about how they responded when their citizens were taken hostage. Some had a policy of trying to negotiate and pay ransom. Some had a policy of refusing to pay ransom and not negotiating. And in the end, the Islamic State exploited this difference in policy. Essentially, all the hostages who came from European countries that pay ransom were eventually freed. And all the hostages that came from countries like the United States and the UK, which do not pay ransom, were eventually killed.

Nick Lemann

As you took up Diane Foley's challenge and began to rethink this – I mean, I think all of us Americans were kind of raised on the bromide that you don't negotiate with terrorists because it will only encourage them in hostage situations in particular, also, in general. I can tell from the book that you've changed your mind to some extent. So could you tell us how that happened for you?

Joel Simon

Yeah. I think there were, it really was a journalistic exploration, and I think there are several factors. First, I became aware of how this policy originated, which surprised me. Basically, in 1973, there was a hostage incident that took place in Sudan, in Khartoum. A Palestinian group took control of the Saudi embassy in Khartoum and kidnapped a number of diplomats, including some US diplomats. And they made some immediate demands for freeing Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, and I think somehow by Jordan. And they also demanded the release of Sirhan Sirhan, which was a kind of strange demand. He was, of course, you know, the person who assassinated Robert Kennedy.

And President Nixon actually had a press conference scheduled the next day after this occurred. And at that press conference, he was asked, you know, "How are you going to respond to this hostage demand?" And he said, you know, "We won't be blackmailed. We won't negotiate." That was understandable, given the demands. But the hostages responded by killing the American diplomat. And after that happened, to a certain extent, the policy was sort of formulated around that statement.

The US was already carrying out a review of how to respond to hostage situations. Somebody at the RAND Corporation had undertaken this effort, and hostage taking at the time mostly targeted US diplomats working abroad, particularly in Latin America. And this person for the RAND Corporation, Brian Jenkins, who carried out the research basically, you know, I spoke with him and he basically told me that to a certain extent, although the US position was hardening, the no concessions policy

was basically formulated around this off the cuff response.

And even at the time, when they carried out the review, he presented his findings and he said there really isn't any evidence to suggest that refusing to negotiate, or refusing to pay, correlates in any way with a reduction or reducing the threat of future kidnappings. That just was not supported by the evidence. So that was one thing that caused me to reevaluate my view.

Nick Lemann

Did Britain, which is even more hardline about this than the US, did it formulate its policy at around the same time, or early, or later?

Joel Simon

It was earlier. I think there were a number of, you know, British diplomats who were kidnapped, and also in Latin America at the time, that was a was a common tactic to target diplomats. And so the "we don't negotiate with terrorists" policy was really formulated in response to a specific kind of kidnapping that targeted diplomats who were, of course, employed by the government. And even when that policy was formulated, it was never intended to apply more broadly to, say, average American citizens, for example.

And there have always been so many exceptions too, I should point out. For example, if you're taken prisoner during an armed conflict, you're a prisoner of war. The Geneva Conventions actually contemplates that there'll be negotiations and exchange of prisoners. So the "we don't negotiate" framework doesn't apply there.

If it's a domestic kidnapping, absolutely doesn't apply. The FBI has always negotiated and even paid ransom. There's, I didn't know this, but there are actually money sort of stashed around the country at the Federal Reserve, as much as \$300,000, that the FBI has used for something called "ransom as lure," where they essentially pay the ransom, free the hostage.

And then, it's very hard, as one FBI agent pointed out to me, kidnapping is a hard crime to get away with because you've got to get the money. And when you get the money, you're very vulnerable.

So the framework was never intended to be very broad, but the way it was pursued shifted really in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks and the war on terror, because then it was put into a new framework.

Nick Lemann

Now, on the other side of the ledger, there are a number of European countries you discuss in the book who have quite a different policy. There's a couple of things I want to ask you about this. First of all, who do you think is closest to having it right? And second, why don't we know more about this? I was surprised – maybe I'm just out of it, but I was surprised to learn from you that there are these different policies in Europe.

Joel Simon

Yeah. I mean, part of the reason we don't know about it is because when allies, these are countries that are allies, have so widely divergent policies, and when they each view the other's policy in some measure as a betrayal of their own ideals, they don't communicate, they don't talk about it, they don't really try and, you know, they're not able to find common ground. I shouldn't say they don't try, because they did try, and that's something I looked at in my book.

As to which country has it right, I would say none. Here's what I found. I found that in France, which is the country that is probably most, you know, thought to be the most likely to capitulate and pay, it's actually a much more complex dynamic. And it has to do with French political culture. And basically the way it works is if you can bring people out in the street and make a fuss on behalf of the hostage, you raise the political cost. And France has a history of relying on the state. It also has a history to resolve these kinds of problems. It also has a history of the government responding to political mobilization, and political mobilization around hostage taking.

So that's the dynamic. You have to put enough pressure on the government that it seeks a political solution. And so there are all these groups now in France that mobilize on behalf of hostages because their lives literally depend on it. And how do you get them home? Well, in most cases, you have to pay, and the governments are willing to do that. But then, they want the political benefit.

So there's this whole ritual where the president goes to the airport and meets the returning hostages and, you know, gets all these accolades. And because there's such a clear political benefit, they're encouraged. The political reality is they want to pay. They're willing to pay very large ransoms, which encourages more, I think raises the price for every hostage everywhere in the world and actually puts more money into the hands of these terrorist groups. So that's not a great option.

Spain, on the other hand, because there is a really strong, kind of almost a uniform understanding that it really is the responsibility of the Spanish government to

resolve these problems. They are the country, along with Italy I think, that's most likely to pay. And as a result, they have a perfect record. That's one reason I chose Spain to document of recovering every single Spanish hostage who's been taken by terrorist groups, because they've paid.

So I don't think anyone's got it right. I think not negotiating as a uniform policy actually is ineffective. But paying large amounts of ransom to terrorist groups certainly fuels their, you know, increases their capacity to carry out further attacks and actually increases the overall demand for ransom.

Nick Lemann

Let's spend a minute sketching out kind of a landscape of the hostage taking business, which you do in the book. So you have, you know, what has been your doorway into this journalist being taken hostage, and I'm interested in, is that on the rise? Is it fairly recent?

Then you have, as you mentioned earlier, diplomats being taken hostage. Then you have the phenomenon, particularly in Latin America, of just wealthy people and, you know, their children being taken hostage as a kind of business.

Joel Simon

Yeah.

Nick Lemann

Without that much political content. And then you have a kind of insurance industry that's built around this. So could you kind of paint that background in for us a little bit?

Joel Simon

Yeah. Well, first of all, one thing about hostage taking is almost all hostage taking is criminal in nature. So the kidnapping, that's not hostage, really, it's kidnapping. So the purpose is to secure a financial benefit. And those cases are handled pretty routinely. People are kidnapped. Mostly people work, you know, in their own countries. They're not international political crimes. A ransom is paid and they are freed. And that is a risk that people who are exposed to that possibility have to insure themselves against.

And so there's a whole industry that grew up, it really grew up in Latin America, but it's based, the center of it is in London, and it's called kidnapping and ransom insurance. Most people don't know about it, and there's a reason for that. Because these policies can actually be invalidated if you talk about the specific policies, because they don't want the kidnapers to know that you're insured.

And the way they work is that if you're kidnapped, you have to raise a ransom and pay, and then after you pay, you will be reimbursed for the payment. And the kidnapping, the industry, the insurance industry will often provide a professional negotiator to help ensure that the ransom that is paid is as low as possible.

So it's a most – this works quite effectively. As terrible as a crime as kidnapping is, if you are insured, and most major companies insure their employees when they're operating in these kinds of environments. Or if you're a wealthy person, you probably have insurance. Most of these cases are resolved through the payment of ransom.

Now, there is an important carve-out that I go into in my book that we can talk about now if you if you'd like. And that has to do with what are called prescribed cases. What are prescribed cases? If you are kidnapped by a designated terrorist group – and there are different ways that groups are designated as terrorist groups – then all of a sudden it is illegal to pay the ransom. Technically illegal. Because you are giving money to terrorists, and the insurance companies legally are not allowed to reimburse you. So your policy is essentially invalidated.

And that's one of the things I found that's functionally unworkable, is the insurance companies and the families and employers of these people need to make a distinction between, are you insured by a criminal group? And let's be clear, some of these criminal groups are pretty darn nasty. You know, they're Mexican drug cartels. You know, if you give them money, they're going to do some nasty things with them. They act kind of like terror groups. Perfectly legal to pay a ransom. Boko Haram in Nigeria. Illegal. Violate the Patriot Act. Violate laws that prohibit providing material assistance to terrorist groups. So you're pretty much on your own if you're kidnapped by one of those groups.

Nick Lemann

So, and just sketch in a little bit on the world of diplomats and journalists. Are journalists a sort of new category here?



Joel Simon

Well, they're not new, but it used to be that diplomats were targeted as representatives of the countries with which political groups had a grievance. So the diplomats were targeted because they represented the government of the country. And call them civilians, they were not targeted regularly. And, you know, some of the reasons for this was because the media environment was different. And just talking about journalists. And even terror groups really needed to talk to and engage with journalists in order to get their message out, and they had a certain trust. There were certainly incidents. We know about, you know, Terry Anderson, you know, was a journalist who was kidnapped by Hezbollah in Lebanon and held for seven years.

So it wasn't that it didn't happen, but they're relatively rare. But a couple of things changed. One was that governments around the world hardened their security for diplomats, so they became much more difficult targets. And secondly, there were, you know, new forms of technology that changed the relationship between journalists and terror groups.

Particularly, you know, when al Qaeda emerged. And, you know, the kidnapping of Daniel Pearl was kind of the first instance of this. But it was a signal to jihadi groups around the world that journalists and aid workers and others who were sort of, not off limits but were less likely to be targeted, were now fair game.

Nick Lemann

So when you kidnap a journalist like Daniel Pearl or Jim Foley, are these people just out for money, or are they trying to send a message, or is it a mix?

Joel Simon

Well, there are, you know, one of the things I learned in my own work and also in writing this book is every case is different. And that's part of the problem with having a uniform policy of, you know, we don't negotiate. There may be circumstances in which you shouldn't negotiate because the strategic interests are so clear that negotiating would be deeply damaging to a kind of national security. And there are others where it's something you may want to consider. So each case is different and the motivations are different.

I mean, I've seen journalists kidnapped, you know, by criminal groups, and they just want a ransom. And I've also seen a journalist kidnapped by political groups, where, for example, in the case of Daniel Pearl, you know, there was no real serious discussion of ransom. I mean, they always saw him as something of a political

hostage, of a tool that al Qaeda was eventually going to use to send a terrifying message to the world.

And one of the things I point out in my book is just how effectively they sent that message. I mean, most people who lived through 9/11, I don't think this applies to younger people, can't name a single person who was killed in the Twin Towers, even though there were thousands of them. But they know Daniel Pearl. And why is that? It was because of the intensive media coverage of his case.

And, you know, we personalize. We in the media, I mean, I participated in trying to personalize it because that was the game plan back then. You humanized and personalized the experience of the hostage. But if the intent of the people taking the hostage was to kill them in this heinous manner, you're actually playing into their hands and furthering their cause. So it's a really complex process of decision making, and each case is different.

Nick Lemann

So let's go back to the Jim Foley case, and you were really involved. You know, you write about it, and you were really involved as an insider. It's a lot more complicated than just, you know, they took him hostage, they kept him with a bunch of other people from other countries, the other countries paid ransom, we didn't pay ransom, so he was killed.

So could you talk a little bit about what was the Foley family doing? What was the Obama administration doing? Was there ever any hope that Jim Foley could have been released as most of the people he was held with were?

Joel Simon

It's hard to answer. It's a very painful question, actually. And I don't, you know, after doing all the research for my book, I still don't know categorically what the answer to that question is.

And I also want to be clear about my, you know, my involvement in the Foley case. You know, I wouldn't call myself an insider. I had certain times at which I was deeply involved. But a lot of what was happening in the Foley case was really, you know, very much behind the scenes, and I was not being consulted or deeply engaged. Until the point where the family decided, you know, they wanted to go public and they wanted to try and raise money to pay a ransom.

The title of the book, *We Want to Negotiate*, is actually drawn from a message that – there were only a handful of times that the kidnappers communicated with the families of the American hostages. And in one of those messages, that was what they wrote. They wrote, “We want to negotiate. Jim Foley is a friend of ours. We don’t want to harm him. We want money.” And that was, the family believed, an opportunity to try and negotiate a ransom payment.

But there were a lot of challenges that the families were facing. One was that there were these group of American families and they didn’t know each other. It actually took David Bradley, the owner of the Atlantic, who took a personal interest in this case, to bring the families together and to allow them to speak with each other and share their experiences.

What they found was that they all had a similar experience and that they felt thwarted, and sort of shunted from agency to agency by the US government. They didn’t feel that the president, in particular, President Obama, and the leadership around President Obama, took a sufficient interest in their case. And at one point, they had a meeting with members of the National Security Council and they were told if you pay a ransom, you face legal jeopardy and you could face legal consequences.

So they felt that they really weren’t treated very well, and that it was excruciating for them to see the European hostages being freed one by one while their children remained in custody. And one of the things I did in this book is I talked to one of the European hostages who was held along with Foley and Sotloff, who was introduced to me by Diane. His name is Federico Motka. And I don’t think he has spoken about his experience previously. You know, and he told me – and this is his view and I believe it’s correct – that there was probably a time early on when the kidnappers – and there were different groups of kidnappers, I should point out, by the way, that were in charge of managing the hostages – probably were looking for some sort of deal for all of them.

And at some point, their position changed. It may have been that they realized that they were going to get large ransom from the Europeans and they were not going to get those kinds of ransom payments for the Americans and the British hostages. So they exploited this difference in policies and they got, you know, tens of millions of dollars. and they got victims for their execution videos, which they used for their recruitment to send a fearsome message to the world.

So, you know, the difference in these type of policies was exploited by the Islamic

State. And they got exactly what they wanted, which was lots of money and these horrific videos. So that's one of the things I looked at in the book is how did we allow that to happen? How did we get to a situation where the different policies were actually playing into the hands of the terrorists?

Nick Lemann

So this leads to what I was going to ask you next, which is, you know, if you were president of the United States.

Joel Simon

God forbid.

Nick Lemann

Well, not from my standpoint. I think you would do an excellent job. But what would, you sort of said nobody gets this right. So now you have a chance to get this right. What would your policy be?

Joel Simon

Well, in terms of what I would articulate from the standpoint of the US government, I would call it a policy of strategic ambiguity. Which is you don't say you don't negotiate. There are many cases in which you would never negotiate and never pay. But what's the point of announcing that? I mean, if the hostages believe they may get paid, I mean, kidnappers, rather, they're more likely to keep the hostages alive. And that may open opportunities to gather intelligence, to launch a raid.

So I think you know, to the extent you express what your policy is, it might be something like "we are working with the families and doing everything we reasonably can to support their efforts to bring their loved ones home." That's about all you need to say.

Secondly, what is the problem here? How do you define the problem? Kidnapping is a tactic of war. And one way I frame it is that, you know, there's two reasons why the logic of never paying ransom will not work. One is, people will do it. You know, people will pay ransom to get their loved ones back if they have to. One person made the analogy, I think it was an FBI agent, that, you know, banning the payment of ransom to stop hostage taking is like stopping armed robbery by making it illegal to give the mugger your wallet. So it just doesn't work.

Number two, how do you define the problem? And I define the problem as too much ransom – the amount of money being paid is too high. It's always going to be a tactic of war. There are always going to be kidnappings in wars. It's always going to be a strategy. You have to accept that it will be there. So what you want to do is you want to minimize the harm, and the way to minimize the harm is to reduce the amount of payment, the amount of money that you can get from kidnapping.

So the European strategy of paying, negotiating directly with the hostage takers, drives up the prices and means that more money is actually going to them. So what I would do is I would essentially look to privatize the negotiation. There are already these professional hostage negotiators that have a very effective track record. They're kind of an extension of the insurance industry. And I would say that if you are kidnapped, the government will support the family by making sure you have access to a professional negotiator, and you will try to negotiate a financial resolution that's reasonable. The government will play a similar role to the one it plays in criminal cases, which is to facilitate the communication, to make sure these families aren't defrauded, and even in some cases, I would suggest, deliver the money.

And there's one other thing that I would introduce. There may be circumstances in which governments believe it's in their national security to pay. And I'm not saying the government should just pay willy-nilly, but there may be certain circumstances where the European government or the American government may believe this, in which case they should have a mechanism to channel the money quietly to the family, maybe without the family even knowing.

And I don't think there's a perfect solution. It's just a terrible crime. But I think that's a lot better than the political posturing of standing up there and saying we won't pay, or the European alternative, which is to politicize these kidnappings and, in the end, use them for the political benefit of the leaders of these countries.

Nick Lemann

Had the Foley family had access to a lot of resources, could they have made a side-deal with their son's kidnapper and bypassed the US government entirely?

Joel Simon

Well, they tried, and they technically would have faced legal jeopardy for doing that. And they were very concerned about that. And I was concerned as well as someone who was involved.

And then after Foley was killed, Diane Foley, who's the subject of another chapter of the book, led this incredible crusade. And it wasn't just her, but I think she was instrumental to actually change the US policy. And there was this hostage policy review that was carried out by the Obama administration. They actually made a lot of improvements in terms of the way that they dealt with the families. But one thing they never put on the table was the no concessions framework. That was clear. They were not going to talk about that.

But when that new policy was announced, President Obama made clear that no US family had ever been prosecuted. Even though it was technically illegal to pay the ransom, no one had ever been prosecuted. That was as close as he came to an assurance that they wouldn't be prosecuted in the future.

But as one insurance person I profile in my book kept saying to me, it's all a gray area. If you are operating in this world and trying to raise money to pay a ransom for someone who's held by a terrorist group, you really don't have any guarantees that you won't be prosecuted. It is already obviously, I mean, it goes without saying, it's the most difficult thing that a family could ever go through. And the reality is, even today, they don't have legal clarity.

Nick Lemann

Do we have any hint of what President Trump thinks about this issue?

Joel Simon

Yes, we do. As a matter of fact, I spoke with – so under the Obama administration, the point person on the National Security Council for this issue was Lisa Monaco. She was the head of counterterrorism on the National, or headed that area on the National Security Council.

And she briefed her successor, Tom Bossert, who played that role in the Trump administration, about the hostage policy review and how the Obama administration had shifted its approach in the aftermath of the killings of Americans in Syria. And Bossert is no longer with the Trump administration, but I was able to talk with him, and he told me that he carried out a review of the policy and recommended to President Trump that he keep it in place.

And the reason he did this, he told me, was because he felt the families had really participated – the families of American hostages – in the discussion of the policy, in the policy review. And he told me that Trump accepted the Obama administration essentially without comment.

It's about the only policy from the Obama administration that remains intact. And there's reasonable cooperation in terms of, or let's just say, communication between the, you know, officials in the Obama administration who worked in this area and those in the Trump administration who are handling it now.

I will say one thing about President Trump and the way he views this issue. If Obama was sometimes criticized for, you know, by the families, they felt that he was so focused on the strategic imperative. You know, deny – and it's a legitimate strategic imperative. You know, denying terrorist financing is an absolutely legitimate goal, and a goal that's consistent with our national security. But then he sometimes didn't understand the human dimension of it.

I think Trump to a certain extent, because he's actually prioritized the recovery of Americans held overseas, he sort of almost takes a little bit of a European approach. And if I worry about anything in the Trump administration, because families tell me they're getting some attention from senior officials, and they appreciate that. But I worry that he politicizes the whole thing and that he's indifferent, or oblivious, to the strategic considerations.

He's absolutely, of course he's gutted the State Department. He's gutted the kind of – he's contemptuous of the other things you need to resolve these cases. You know, local knowledge, expertise, a seasoned diplomatic corps, a free media. So I think but, you know, I think it's obviously a mixed bag, but Trump certainly has given the issue some attention.

Nick Lemann

How many American hostages are out there right now?

Joel Simon

Well, one thing you asked me earlier is, have we seen, you know, a kind of wave of kidnapping and where are we now? And that's actually the term I would use. You know, kidnapping comes in waves. And it's part of, sort of becomes part of – these kinds of political kidnappings we're talking about. Criminal kidnappings are always going on in the background. And we saw a huge spike in the number of Westerners kidnapped when this became a favored jihadi tactic. So with Al Qaida and the Islamic State and the Taliban and in Somalia, which we haven't talked about much.

But that has faded somewhat. It's faded because Al Qaida doesn't hold territory in the same way. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in North Africa, which was

responsible for many of these kidnappings, is weakened. The Islamic State is obviously weakened. So we're seeing an ebb right now. But I think that could shift easily. It just depends on, you know, the circumstances.

And there are Americans who are held overseas in conditions that we're not quite certain about. One example is Austin Tice. He was a freelance journalist who was working for the Washington Post and McClatchy. He was working in Syria, he was kidnapped. Not kidnapped – he was detained at some sort of checkpoint. We don't know all the details.

That was six years ago. The US government and my sources as well have told me that he's alive. They believe he's alive. We don't know precisely who's holding him and why. We don't know what kinds of negotiations might or might not be taking place. But I will say this. Based on my research, it's really important that we keep cases like his visible and in the public eye because it is very easy, especially after six years, for the public and therefore for the government to forget about these cases. And I think his case won't be resolved without consistent government engagement.

Nick Lemann

We're at the end of our time, so we have to stop. But thank you very much Joel, for coming in and doing this. This is a fascinating topic and as listeners have just heard, you're getting from Joel a level of discussion that you just don't see in the daily press. That's what we're here to do. So I hope everyone listening will have a chance to take a look at his book. It's available now. And just to remind you of the title, it's we Want to Negotiate: The Secret World of Kidnapping, Hostages and Ransom by Joel Simon.

That's our show for today. Just one reminder to subscribe to the feed and please write a review when you have something to say about the show. We love hearing from you. Here's a recent review, for example, from someone called Bruce C.T. that said, "Found it intellectually stimulating. Can't wait for the rest of the podcast." Well, you won't be waiting long, Bruce. We're going to keep putting them out.

Definitely stay in touch with us. You'll find all our social profiles as well as our books, blogs, events, and more at [globalreports.columbia.edu](http://globalreports.columbia.edu). That's [globalreports.columbia.edu](http://globalreports.columbia.edu). Most readers are curious and busy. Our books are for them. I'm Nick Lemmon signing off. Thanks for listening.