

# An Alumnus' Journey from Imagined Principalities to the Real Republic

*A conversation with Kenneth Weinstein, AB '84*

Hansong Li

**K**enneth Weinstein graduated from the University of Chicago (B.A.), the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (D.E.A.) and Harvard University (Ph.D.). A political theorist and a public servant, Weinstein has served by presidential appointment and Senate confirmation as a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors and on the National Humanities Council, and is currently CEO of the Hudson Institute. A frequent guest on French media, Weinstein has served as commentator for live French television coverage of U.S. presidential elections since 1996. He is decorated with a knighthood (Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres) in Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication. The conversation took place in the Saxbys Café, Washington D.C., on July 26th 2016.

Hansong Li is a fourth-year in the College majoring in Fundamentals and History.

**HL:** *What brought you to study the humanities at the University of Chicago?*

**KW:** My path was a little unusual. I didn't begin college at the University of Chicago, but in a six-year BA/MD joint degree program in New York—the City College of New York. I always assumed that I would be a physician. My father was a doctor, both of my grandfathers were doctors, and my uncle and cousins as well. Right after I began the BA/MD program, I realized that I did not want to deal with bodies, and that medicine did not appeal to my interests. So, I dropped out and, not knowing what to do with my life, ended up volunteering on a political campaign. First, I worked for Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign in 1979 in New York,

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then for George H.W. Bush's, and during the campaign I moved to Washington.

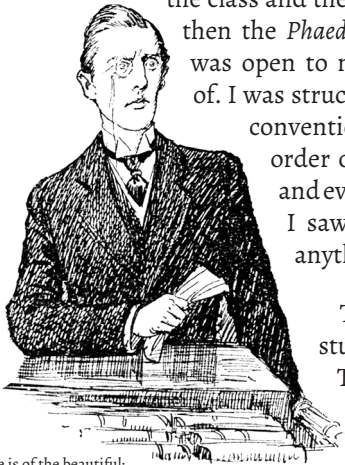
I visited the University of Chicago campus on the day of the Iowa Caucus, which was, if you look at the date, probably Jan. 21st, 1980. The second I stepped on the campus of the University of Chicago I felt at home. I met students who were intellectual, inquisitive, socially awkward, a little ill at ease with the world and ill at ease with themselves.

**HL:** *It's still the case, especially the last part.*

**KW:** And that's why I very much felt at home. I chose to come to the University of Chicago for a number of other reasons. For one, I mistakenly thought that Chicago, unlike the Ivy Leagues such as Columbia where I had also been admitted, didn't require a swim test. I learned very quickly that I was dead wrong.

**HL:** *Right, the swim test requirement was abolished fairly late, around 2012.*

**KW:** Yes, so the beginning was swimming. But it was also the Common Core. The first class I took was Human Being and Citizen, which was designed by Leon and Amy Kass, and it really came to play a very central role in my life, much to my surprise. I walked into the class and the first reading was the *Apology of Socrates*, then the *Phaedo*, *Crito* and the *Republic*. A new world was open to me that I had been absolutely unaware of. I was struck by the distinction between nature and convention, the notion of the possibility of an order of souls, discussions on the best regime and even the forms of the dialogues themselves. I saw a depth in Plato and Aristotle unlike anything I had encountered before.



Love is of the beautiful;  
and therefore Love is also a lover of wisdom.

Then I had the very good fortune to study with both Allan Bloom and Nathan Tarcov. They were remarkable teachers. Allan Bloom was undoubtedly the most remarkable individual I've ever

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encountered. He had a rare talent: your entire interaction with him was akin to a Platonic dialogue. There was the surface discussion, but also something that he was trying to teach you—and I mean you as an individual. Just an ordinary discussion walking down the street—it could have been in the classroom talking about Plato and Rousseau, or just joining him at the barber shop, or having lunch together—he was constantly trying to teach you something, something about yourself, sometimes very profound truths. He had a psychological insight deeper than that of anyone else I have ever come across. And he had this ability of picking up things about yourself that you are only vaguely aware of. Though he is gone almost twenty-five years, I still laugh hard at some of the jokes he told.

One of the greatest days of my undergraduate life was—it was in junior year, spring quarter—I went to France to work on my French, and Bloom came to Paris. I spent a day walking around Paris with him. He opened up Paris to me: the grandeur of the *ancien régime*, what life was like back then, and what the revolution meant. There was a deeper sense of what France was about. And these few hours came to shape me in ways so deep that I ended up doing a large part of my graduate work in France: I did a graduate degree in Soviet and Eastern European Studies, and later went on to do doctoral work at Harvard. But throughout these years my interactions with Bloom in Paris have always been defining in terms of how I perceive French society, culture and history.

**HL:** *So the promenade with Bloom inspired you to study at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris?*

**KW:** Absolutely, though that was also Harvey Mansfield's suggestion that I should go and explore. But it was definitely very much influenced by Bloom: he opened the world of ideas and culture that is in some way the counterpart to what America stood for. In a certain way, it is tragic that Europe has become so Americanized. In my early years as a student, the French spoke, acted and even smiled in a certain way, but when I went back to give a talk at Sciences Po a couple of years ago, I was struck at just how American the French students looked. The cultural differences have become less important than they once had been. Partly because of the European project and

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partly due to the pressures of mass media and multiculturalism, France is certainly not the France that it was 35 years ago.

**HL:** *How would you compare your education at the University of Chicago to intellectual experiences elsewhere?*

**KW:** I majored in what was then called General Studies in the Humanities, a precursor to Fundamentals: Issues and Texts, which was still in its formation when I was there. I took classes with Cropsey in addition to Bloom and Tarcov. I also took English and French literature classes. I emerged as a very different person at the end of my four years at Chicago than at the beginning. When I first came in, I was very political, somewhat economics-focused, and wanted to study economics. For in my years working for political campaigns I became increasingly interested in economic issues. In fact, I used to write a lot on free-market economics in high school. But the University of Chicago gave me a real education—thinking about the human possibilities and the fundamental challenges man faces, not some faddish, academic jibberish. I can't imagine getting a better education elsewhere. I taught as a graduate student at Harvard. Later, I taught at Claremont and Georgetown. But Chicago has an intensity in its academic life about ideas, a passion and dedication, and I've never seen anything like that.



By contrast, at Harvard, it's more about what happens after you graduate—whether the jobs will line up neatly. At Chicago, the world of ideas matters: we had real discussions about Aristotle, Plato, Tocqueville, Hobbes and Locke that were unlike anything else I've ever seen. The students at Sciences Po are probably the second most impressive. But they were impressive because they had a general culture. For, as you know, to go to a *grande école*, requires a level of competence in the face of significant competition for admissions, and at the higher level of the lycée education there is much literature and philosophy. But even they don't have that depth, and there is no tension in the soul the way you see among Chicago kids—that they are

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uncomfortable with themselves and with the world around them. The University of Chicago was definitely a unique place when I was there.

**HL:** *Do you remember what the political environment was like on campus in the 80s?*

**KW:** I was absorbed into my studies and barely involved in political activism. The first year I was involved in the College Republicans and other groups. But I quickly became much more interested in my studies than in partisan things, and never wrote for student newspapers. I also think that one of the greatest things about the Chicago education is that it teaches the limits of partisanship. There is no truth in a partial truth. Or, I could rephrase that as: partisanship requires the affirmation of partial truth.

**HL:** *There still seems to be a general consensus, though increasingly challenged, that the intellectual life stands above particular interests, and that rigorous inquiry is indispensable to the search of truth.*

**KW:** Yes, and I always thought that Chicago is relatively free from excessive political correctness and hyper-partisanship. Harvard and Sciences Po to some degree are more enslaved to conventional opinions. There was a seriousness at the University of Chicago that is not found elsewhere.

**HL:** *As a regular contributor to Le Monde and Le Figaro, how do you consider the different perspectives of the Europeans and the Americans on political questions?*

**KW:** I think that the philosophical perspective tends to be the broadest perspective. And having a more international perspective on issues can in some ways serve that purpose of broadening, but it can be less insightful as well. It is ideal that breadth complements depth in our analysis of these issues.

I've also found that we Americans have not been terribly good at doing alliance politics. There were times when Western alliances worked effectively in the aftermath of World War II, by making our

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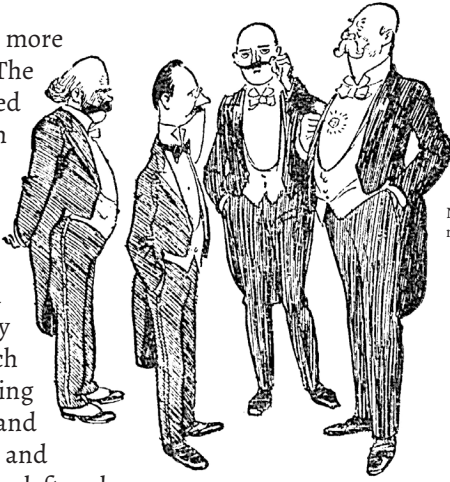
allies understand that the relationship is not transactional and that there is a deeper common cause that we stand for. And my time in both France and in Germany has allowed me to be sensitive to the claims that the Europeans make against us that we tend to overlook. In a sense, the Americans aren't trained to do international affairs. Most of the American officials don't do that well. Foreign affairs is an item on the checklist that a candidate has to check when running for president, offering positions on this or that issue. But our leaders don't grow up consciously understanding that America has unique global responsibilities and a critical part of our role in the world is the leadership that comes out of the White House. And an important part of that leadership is understanding how our allies think, and what you need to do to persuade them. Oftentimes our politicians are not aware that what they say and do have a very broad impact in ways that they cannot imagine. So, spending time overseas has broadened my understanding of the challenges faced by our officials, and has given me a much firmer understanding of American exceptionalism—what it is that we stand for and defend. It's enabled me to appreciate how complicated alliances are—how hard the work is, but how important it is as well.

**HL:** *And that effort also includes spreading our messages to the rest of the world. As a member of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, what do you consider to be the agency's historical and present roles? How much has it actually done? And what is your evaluation of our propaganda efforts in the last few decades?*

**KW:** I wouldn't call it propaganda. The U.S. international media played a critical role in the Cold War. Radio Free Europe and Voice of America reached audiences, provided information behind the Iron Curtain in ways that no one could imagine, whether it would be people in Czechoslovakia after the Soviet troops had come in, or in Poland after the martial law had been imposed. The locals had a sense that others were standing up for freedom, and we were able to use broadcast to reassure and inform them, give them the moral courage to go on and live their lives, and to get ready for the regimes to fall. It laid the basis for civil society and a free press, so the work was critically important.

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Today we face a much more complicated challenge. The Soviets were unsophisticated in their use of information warfare. They had allies in the West who would stand for them, but they were unsophisticated in manipulating information to their advantage. Today our adversaries are much more effective at fighting information warfare and spreading distortions and building alliances both on the left and on the right, in order to undermine Western solidarity. Therefore, we are fighting a much more complicated and multifaceted information war not just against Russia and China but also against ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood and a wide array of political opponents who oftentimes tend to know how to manipulate our own media effectively.



Naturally they all made a big fuss...

**HL:** *That means the new situation requires a much more sophisticated strategy on our part.*

**KW:** Right, infinitely more sophisticated strategies on our part. We are beginning to adopt more effective ways of fighting this warfare, but it is complicated work, hampered by rules and regulations that our opponents aren't bothered by. But we have become much more adept now at producing and countering reports. For example, when the report came out of Crimea saying that Russian speakers were slaughtered, we immediately confirmed that there were no bodies and no slaughter at that very location. We've developed all sorts of techniques and programs that show that Russian speakers are not being handled brutally in these countries. Similarly, our work on Radio Free Asia does an immense job of broadcasting information to various peoples inside China.

**HL:** *Do you think that the U.S. is at a disadvantage because it is being held*

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*accountable for higher moral principles than its opponents are?*

**KW:** I think we are at an absolute disadvantage because of our principles that our adversaries do not abide by. We are also at a disadvantage because of the moral relativism that Allan Bloom decried. Say, when Russian armies rolled into Crimea, President Obama's immediate reaction was “oh, we need to have an inquiry in order to find out what is going on,” whereas it was very clear what was going on. Oftentimes we are hampered by the sense that we have to listen to both sides of the story, no matter what the story is about. Surely, we did not feel that way in WWII, and we didn't feel that way at all in earlier conflicts. There is a creeping cultural relativism that has really weakened our society and made us unwilling to stand up at critical moments—when poisonous gases are being used in Syria against the civilians, when Russians make false claims that people are being attacked. This is a huge problem: that we both abide by our principles, our due processes, and are also affected by a cultural relativism that makes it much more difficult to stand up for the principles that we believe in.

**HL:** *Were the 9/11 attacks a turning point for you and your colleagues at the Hudson Institute?*

**KW:** It really was. The institute was built by Herman Kahn, a great futurist and nuclear strategist. At the time of Hudson's founding in 1961, he was largely focused on the threat of the Soviet Union and nuclear warfare. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, we ended up moving our focus to domestic policy. One of the most important pieces of work we did was to develop the Wisconsin welfare reform program, which began the basis for the national welfare reform bill that President Clinton signed into law. We also first developed the notion of charter schools.

After 9/11, it became increasingly clear that we needed to turn our focus onto international affairs, national security, and the threat of Islamic radicalism. I think for many of us it was a very defining moment, not just in our personal lives but also because it raised the stakes. With the Twin Towers coming down, our own way of life was threatened. It forced us to realize that the world that America had



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lived in for over two centuries was coming to an end.

**HL:** *What role does and should the National Humanities Council play? Does it function well without political pressures?*

**KW:** I was very fortunate to serve for six years in the National Humanities Council. It is an important body: the National Endowment for the Humanities provides significant grant funding to the humanities, and to institutions around the country including the University of Chicago. We also have the annual Jefferson Lecture, which is the highest honor that humanities and art can offer. In addition, we awarded the National Humanities Medals. I was pleased that in my tenure on the Council, a number of University of Chicago professors were awarded the National Humanities Medal, and Leon Kass was given the Jefferson Lecture. These are important signs of the best kinds of achievements in the fields of the arts and humanities.

The National Humanities Council should honor the best of the humanities work that the country has to offer. When it functions well, it honors the absolute best work. That means it should be free of political pressure, so that our society would not appeal to the most vulgar and popular elements that are endangering our democracy. So it is an important institution, but only when it does its work well.

**HL:** *What is the relationship between scholarship and statesmanship?*

**KW:** I don't think politicians should be scholars. Officials are oftentimes faced with challenges so critical that they need to make decisions in a very compressed time window—whether it is to react on behalf of national security or to react to events that are unfolding in an artificial political timetable, such as a legislative calendar, that puts pressure on policymakers to act relatively quickly. Politicians usually have very little understanding of critical issues. I think the ideal role of policy research institutions like Hudson is to broaden their understanding and to set the fundamental framework in which the questions and issues are examined, so that the right kind of questions are being asked, and that the right types of answers can be proposed.

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For example, oftentimes in public policy, we have a crisis mentality that hits the country in which politicians and elected officials assume that a momentary crisis was developing into a major and long term one—whereas there is in fact not a crisis, but only problems that are not national or massive. I believe that when a think tank does its work best, it is able to frame the debate to show that what you think is a problem is actually not, and that the real problem is actually something much deeper, and you need to have a longer-term perspective and keep your eyes on what the real questions are. Those are our real additions to the debate. The goal is really to come to a true understanding of what the policy challenges are and to frame them in the right perspective.

**HL:** *And that's the difficult task of balancing the complexity that is required in thinking, and the simplicity that is necessary for decision-making. Does the practical work of the policy research world stand in between?*

**KW:** Scholars seek oftentimes to deepen our understanding of certain issues within the scholarly apparatus. I think in the policy world we are asked to think in ways sometimes much more naïve than the academics do. We are asked to look at a question, and when we do our work best we undertake a kind of naïve examination somewhat philosophically inspired, which would lead to a better understanding of what the true problems are. The really best think tank work has something in common with the rejection of convention – the analogy is far from perfect, but sometimes I feel some policy experts are stuck in the proverbial cave and need to turn towards a truer understanding. But in challenging the conventional wisdom, what everyone else is saying, one has to be guided by a practical reason in order to deliberate well and to make your proposals real and effective.



Who are the people who love wisdom?