

Shaping the Global Future Together

An Interview with Frederick Kempe, President and Chief Executive Officer, Atlantic Council

EDITORS' NOTE Before joining the Atlantic Council, Fred Kempe was a prize-winning editor and reporter at The Wall Street Journal for more than twenty-five years. In New York, he served as Assistant Managing Editor, International, and columnist. Prior to that, he was the longest-serving editor and Associate Publisher of The Wall Street Journal Europe, running The Wall Street Journal's global editorial operations in Europe and the Middle East. In 2002, *The European Voice*, a leading publication following



Frederick Kempe

EU affairs, selected Kempe as one of the 50 most influential Europeans, and as one of the four leading journalists in Europe. At The Wall Street Journal, he served as a roving correspondent based out of London; as a Vienna Bureau Chief covering Eastern Europe and East-West Affairs; as Chief Diplomatic Correspondent in Washington, D.C.; and as the paper's first Berlin Bureau Chief following the unification of Germany and collapse of the Soviet Union. He is the author of four books. The most recent, *Berlin 1961: Kennedy, Khrushchev*, and the *Most Dangerous Place on Earth*, was a New York Times Best Seller and a National Best Seller. For his commitment to strengthening the transatlantic alliance, Kempe has been decorated by the Presidents of Poland and Germany and by King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden. Kempe is a graduate of the University of Utah and has a master's degree from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, where he was a member of the International Fellows program in the School of International Affairs. He won the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism's top alumni achievement award and the University of Utah's Distinguished Alumnus Award.

COMPANY BRIEF The Atlantic Council (atlanticcouncil.org) promotes constructive leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the Atlantic Community's central role in meeting global challenges. The Council provides an essential forum for navigating the dramatic economic and political changes defining the twenty-first century by informing and galvanizing its uniquely influential network of global leaders. The Atlantic Council—through the papers it publishes, the ideas it generates, the future leaders it develops, and the communities it builds—shapes policy choices and strategies to create a more free, secure, and prosperous world.

How do you define the purpose and mission of the Atlantic Council?

The Atlantic Council's purpose is an audacious one that is designed to capture the imagination of our staff, our donors and our global community of stakeholders around a historic imperative. Put simply, our mission is "shaping the global future together" alongside partners and allies. Break that down, and the first word "shaping" speaks to our solutions-oriented ethos. The second few words, "the global future," speak to our future-oriented work. But it's the last word that is most powerful, "TOGETHER."

The Atlantic Council acts from the conviction that no one and no country, no matter how powerful, can achieve lasting and positive outcomes in today's world except in partnership with others.

In the case of the United States, we can only defend the democratic values, individual human rights and common purpose that have advanced freedom and prosperity over the past 75 years if we work more effectively with our global partners than we are doing at the moment. We believe the world stands at an inflection point as historically important as the end of World War I and the end of World War II.

Our mistakes at the end of the first World War – isolationism, nationalism and political polarization – resulted in fascism, the Holocaust and the millions who died in World War II. The cost of our failure could be measured in lives and freedom lost.

Our comparative success after World War II – creating with our partners all the major international institutions of the post-war order – should have taught us that the major problems of today's world can only be addressed through common cause, international collaboration and a recognition that the world's democracies must work more effectively together.

We know the Atlantic Council alone can't achieve these outcomes. However, we believe that we'd be selling our institution short if we didn't recognize our responsibility to contribute to a better future in whatever way we can.

How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

I collect quotes on leadership. I like to hang them in prominent places. They all have elements of truth and no one can abide by all of them, and perhaps that is for me what defines leadership. Leadership today is about listening. Ernest Hemingway said, "When people talk, listen completely." Being an active listener is

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perhaps the hardest skill to learn and master, and I'm still working on it.

Leadership is about learning. “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other,” said President John F. Kennedy. It's about knowing you can't have all the answers, and that if you've hired well and have befriended well, you have surrounded yourself with people from whom you can learn and who will help you continually grow.

Leadership is then about empowering and inspiring those who work with you to listen and learn as well. Once you have listened and learned, it is about acting with confidence in a manner that will make a difference. Then you must lead, but it won't have credibility if you haven't listened and learned and empowered along the way.

Leadership is ultimately about resilience. Do you always bounce back stronger? Churchill said, “Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts.”

Are you equipped to handle what life throws at you?

How do you define resilience and how critical is resilience in the work of a think tank?

Most people think resilience is the ability to bounce back, that it's the ability to recover quickly from the world's inevitable shocks and stresses. I think it's the ability to bounce back better. Resilience is crucial in every walk of life. No individual, company or country can escape stresses and shocks. The question is whether that individual, company or country is designed to not just survive those stresses and shocks, which is important, but whether one emerges even stronger, which to me is the new definition of resilience.

Bouncing back is good. Bouncing back stronger is better. The term that really appeals to me is “resilience by design.” How can one design one's self, one's company, one's country, or even the entire global environment, to be more resilient?

What do you see as the importance of resilience in addressing the global crises the world is facing today?

It is at the core of everything. History has taught us that we will never avoid global crises. However, the societies, the systems and the institutions that endure are those that bounce back from those crises and become stronger. That has been the modern history

of the United States. Yet great empires and entire species have disappeared from the earth because they lacked resilience. The science of resilience fascinates me. Why does one species thrive and another disappear? Why does one country thrive and another collapse? Why does one form of government whether all shocks and another not?

Will you discuss the Atlantic Council's involvement in the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center?

We as Western powers have ended war. We have advanced democracy. We have defined and defended human rights. We now are called upon to save our planet. The Atlantic Council's mission is “shaping the global future together” with partners and allies. What could be a more compelling mission than working together to find resilient solutions to issues of climate, migration and public health?

For me, the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center at its core is taking those muscle movements that we've learned so well at the Atlantic Council and across the Atlantic community and applying them to a new set of issues of existential nature. Some argue that resilience and climate-related issues are in some way a departure from our traditional mission. That's just not true. We have embraced the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center because it is the natural extension of our mission for the challenges of our times.

Has the Atlantic Council's work changed as a result of COVID-19 and the anti-racist movement across the U.S. and the world?

Put most simply, we've shown our resilience. We have bounced back stronger. I never would have wished this crisis on the world, but it has underscored the power of our founding purpose. We were well-prepared because we had developed digital tools and we had structured our organization to empower individual initiative. The most crucial factors were that we had a compelling mission, we had the right culture to address it and a donor community that believed in us.

We face a triple challenge: the worst pandemic in a century, the worst economic shock since the Great Depression and the most significant racial upheavals in 50 years. They have all sharpened the dramatic need for us to work together more effectively to shape the future.

As a leader, how are you able to build a resilient culture within your organization?

Today's world is one defined by volatility and uncertainty. To succeed in this environment, all organizations need to be more resilient. What does that mean? It means they must be more adaptive and agile. I'm still learning how to build that sort of culture, but what I've learned is that a good starting point is hiring optimistic, innovative, dynamic and creative employees who tend to bounce back better from setbacks. However, there's also a leadership responsibility in developing a culture that fosters positive attitudes, innovative actions and dynamic and creative individuals. Resilient employees are more productive, they manage stress more effectively, they are more collegial, and they have higher morale.

Do you feel that resilience is something a person is born with or can it be taught?

It's both nature and nurture. Some individuals just have it. However, the good news is it can be learned, and it can be taught.

How has your personal resilience helped to drive your work?

At every stage of my life, there have been obstacles to overcome that either prompted me to learn and grow or would have undermined me. Resilience colors everything. Without it, one is doomed. If one embraces setbacks as an ingredient to success, you succeed.

Who are some of the resilient leaders you see today?

Perhaps you should make that the subject of an entire magazine. Rather than give you a long list, let me tell you about a leader I spoke to recently whose resilience boggles my mind – Senator Tammy Duckworth. When you meet her, you feel the positive energy of a person who bounces back stronger from unimaginable setbacks. In 2004 in Iraq, Iraqi insurgents hit her helicopter with a rocket-propelled grenade. The resulting injuries cost her both legs and mobility in her right arm. What was her response? She sought and got a medical waiver that allowed her to continue to serve in the Illinois Army National Guard until she retired a decade later as a lieutenant colonel. She then devoted her life to serving veterans and her country, starting at the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, then as an assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, with two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives and now in the Senate. Her commitment to this country and her ability to persevere are awe-inspiring. ●