

Whether talking about countries maneuvering through complex trade agreements or siblings embroiled in cutthroat litigation over a parent's estate, with vast legal fees being spent, little is more important to successful, satisfying conclusions than the fine art of negotiation.

Former Utah governor and one-time Republican presidential candidate, Jon Meade Huntsman Jr. knows the importance of negotiation all too well. In his still-developing career, Huntsman has served in the administrations of every US president since Carter and has twice been appointed US ambassador, first to Singapore and more recently to our nation's most important of all trading partners: China. Huntsman often navigates treacherous political waters, both abroad and at home. He has been willing to cross party lines on issues important to him and has balanced friend and foe to reach the ever-elusive middle ground.

Huntsman recently visited Sarasota for the Ringling College Library Association's Town Hall Lecture Series, underwritten in part by Williams Parker. The series regularly brings luminaries of international prominence to Sarasota; recent speakers have included Condoleezza Rice, Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. Requisite asked a few questions of the affable Gov. Huntsman to gain more insight into his approach to politics, business, his own extensive family, and, ultimately, the world stage.

*This interview has been edited for clarity.*

**WP** You have had a multifaceted career and held many positions of power. What strategies do you keep in mind when you enter difficult negotiation situations?

## Huntsman

I've been a negotiator as a diplomat, in business; I've negotiated a lot as governor. Understanding both sides of the argument is critically important. Amazingly, we don't do that anymore these days in politics. It's your side of the argument and never your opponent's side. That gets us into exactly where we are today in Washington, which is a total stalemate situation. We've reached political impasse on the biggest issues of the day. We can't do budgets, we can't do research and development, we can't conclude the most important things needed to keep the nation moving forward.

**WP** Why do you think our national political dialogue has broken down so dramatically?



*Jon Huntsman Jr.  
Ringling College Library Association Town Hall Lecture Series  
Courtesy of Robert Pope Photography  
Sarasota, Florida*

## Huntsman

I think it's largely because we don't negotiate anymore. We do politics, we play games, we do theatrics, but we don't negotiate in good faith. I have always felt that negotiations in good faith require an understanding of where your opposite side is coming from, what they need to meet the demands of their constituents. If they don't come out a winner, you don't come out a winner. Then nobody wins.

WP

How did this negotiating stalemate start? Can you point to an intersection we crossed to reach the logjam we are in now?

## Huntsman

I've got a radio program and I ask that question of people who come on—governors, senators—because I am seriously interested in the antecedents to the political divide. I get a different answer from everyone. I will tell you a common theme I agree with is the big money from singular sources now flowing into politics. We have seen the professionalism of politics. It's no longer a feat of public service or a desire to put your country first, before your party. You get to Congress and you've picked a team, you're elected on a team. You are funded by all the predictable funding, you're given all the predictable talking points. It isn't the name on the jersey anymore that matters. It's the color of the jersey.

**WP** Your father famously said, ‘Winners never cheat.’ Is that something that is really achievable in the realm of negotiation, especially in your dealings as ambassador with a major foreign power like China?

## Huntsman

Winners typically abide by pretty strong values. You know, Benjamin Franklin was asked by our first secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson—Jefferson wanted to recruit Franklin in more of a military capacity with our new nation—and Franklin famously said, ‘No, I’d rather be a diplomat. I’d rather lie for my country than die for my country.’ (Huntsman laughs.) And so they sent him to be our first ambassador to France. But I think a strong sense of values goes through winners. They are not perfect, nobody is perfect, but winners in any sector of life—and I have had the good fortune of seeing a lot of outstanding people during my career—they are driven by strong, consistent values that are mostly unshakeable, that take them to wherever their destination happens to be.

**WP** Governor, your political record is much more diverse than your party line. How important is it for a leader or negotiator to view the world in shades of gray as opposed to black and white?

## Huntsman

You bring principles to the negotiating table and you see that the world is, in fact, different shades of gray. There are no perfect balances. There are no perfect sets of solutions for the challenges we face in the world. There are no easy fixes to the major problems, whether they are economic or security. It always comes down to a knock-down, drag-out negotiation, whether it’s in Congress, in business, in local government, or diplomatically. We negotiate to get things done.

**WP** Do you have examples of your greatest successes or failures in negotiating?

## Huntsman

(He laughs.) My greatest failure must be my inability to win over my now-wife. I took about five years to get there. Probably my best negotiation was with my own kids. I have found that the toughest negotiations have been around our kitchen table. Far more difficult than any negotiation with the legislature or the Chinese—it’s with your own kids. That our kids are in decent shape, I take that as a sign of negotiating success.

**WP** You’ve served under the administrations of five presidents. Who had the best ability to reach across the political aisle, to negotiate with foreign powers?

## Huntsman

While they were all unique in their individual ways, I’d say that Ronald Reagan had a unique capacity to deal with foreign leaders. He had a set of principles that governed his behavior on the world stage. He was looking for results and he didn’t let strict ideologies stand in his way. Often people in my party who characterize Reagan as the father of the Tea Party, they get the guy fundamentally wrong. He was a man of principle, he was decent, and he had the courage and foresight to sit down with Mikhail Gorbachev.

WP How is that different from the negotiating that goes on today?

## Huntsman

In today's world, you're supposed to bomb your enemy. You don't negotiate with them. Reagan sat down with Gorbachev. Can you imagine how that would go over in today's world? The archenemy! He sat at negotiation after negotiation after negotiation. That led to the end of the Cold War, which I would say was the most important international event of my generation. The end of the bipolar world that so consumed the budgets and the thinking of my parents' generation and a good part of my generation. Done.

WP Where are we now in terms of international negotiation?

## Huntsman

I think that since Reagan, we have been uncertain of our direction as a country from a foreign policy standpoint. We got hit on 9/11, we went into the Middle East, we have been reeling ever since, and we had the economic calamities following that. We haven't had a discussion as a country about America's role in the world, our values, what it means to be a friend or ally of the United States. That's why the 2016 presidential election will be very important. We'll discuss America's role in the world. As we do, I hope we reflect on how Reagan handled his relationships abroad. We are at an inflection point for this world, like 1919 or 1945. We will either make decisions to be like 1919 and throw us into a sense of despair domestically and globally, or we will make decisions that will be like 1945—that will lead to growth, security, and optimism. The consequences are so profoundly important.

WP How does China fit into the American equation?

## Huntsman

The world will be affected by one relationship more than any other as we move forward and that will be the US-China relationship. When the history books are written, the headline issue of the 21st century will be the rise of China and how its rise was responded to by the rest of the world. Did the world respond in a hostile fashion that led to war and mayhem and bloodshed and catastrophe? Or was China integrated into the international system in ways that gave rise to prosperity to more people than not? Xi Jinping is the new Chinese leader. He's two years into his administration; he'll be around for another seven or eight until 2022. You'd better get to know him because he will do more to impact the world in which we live and choices we make as a nation than anyone else. It will not be ISIS.

WP Anything else, Governor?

## Huntsman

If you're looking for a good long-term investment, I recommend beachfront property in Sri Lanka. The global population will peak at 11 billion, with 4 billion in Africa and 5 billion in Asia. By that time, the main thoroughfare of the world will not be the Pacific Ocean—it will be the Indian Ocean because that will be the waterway linking 9 billion of the world's 11 billion people.