



A Relentless Search For Greater Understanding, by Robert E. Rubin

There are no provable certainties. That is the view of modern science and much of modern philosophy. And, this view -- that there are no absolute or certain answers -- quickly leads to recognizing that all significant issues are inherently complex and uncertain and, as a consequence, that all decisions are about probabilities and trade-offs. That, in turn, should lead to restlessly seeking to better understand whatever is before you in order to most effectively refine your judgments about those probabilities and trade-offs. Once you recognize uncertainty and complexity, you approach new questions -- or for that matter, new experiences, such as, in my life, a new job or moving from the private sector to government -- not with answers or a sense of certainty, but rather with a sense of inquiry and searching and the pursuit of understanding. All of this may sound somewhat abstract and conceptual, but in fact it is intensely practical. For me -- this probabilistic framework led to sounder decisions and, in addition, recognizing that decisions are about odds and therefore have at least a possibility of not turning out as you expect leads to contingency planning, which can make all the difference when matters do go unexpectedly. [!] Even if you do all this, there is another essential for successful decision-making. I sat next to a former presidential candidate at a dinner in 1972, shortly after he lost in the primaries, and I've never forgotten what he said to me that night, which was that the worst mistake he had made in his life was trying to be something he wasn't when he ran for president, and that he should have simply been the person he was and let the American people decide if that's what they wanted. [!] These three elements -- the willingness to make difficult decisions; the resolve to approach decision-making with an open mind, a recognition of uncertainty, and a relentless search for greater understanding -- and the ability to remain true to oneself in the face of adversity and challenge -- are as important to everyday life in Washington state as they are in policymaking in Washington, D.C., and the best response to a complicated and uncertain world. --Robert E. Rubin