

Marshall here. Welcome back to the Realignment.

Hey everyone, Saga and I just wrapped our marathon Realignment Live conference in DC yesterday. Those episodes are going to be up on the feed in coming weeks. So I thought I would follow up with a series of essays edited by Emil Doak and Realignment Live guest Helen Andrews titled Main Street Conservatism, the Future of the Right, Lessons from 20 Years of the American Conservative. It's great to dive into this topic with a past guest, that being Helen. We did an episode on her book Boomers back in 2021. I really suggest folks check that out. We'll be of deep interest to folks who love generational discourse but the American Conservative is playing a central role in the debate around the Realignment. You have a series of essays that have come out not only in this volume but also in general that have impacted a lot of my thoughts on these issues. It's also where younger senators on the right are debating a lot of these topics so I suggest folks check that out as well. Hope you all enjoy this conversation and we'll be back with you tomorrow. Emil and Helen, welcome to the Realignment. Thanks for having us.

In the case of you, Helen, this is your return to the Realignment. We obviously spoke about Boomers around in early 2021. I believe folks should check out that episode. Really enjoyed the book. It's more of a fun read than a lot of these political books tend to be so people should definitely check that out. They haven't checked it out already but we're here to speak about Main Street Conservatism, the Future of the Right, Lessons from 20 Years of the American Conservative. A publication that the two of you obviously are deeply involved with. Let's just start with you, Emil, since this is your first appearance on the show. What is Main Street Conservatism? Thanks for having me, Marshall. It seems like everyone these days is trying to put an adjective in front of conservative. We've done the same. Apologies for that.

What we really found looking over the last or I guess the first 20 years of the American Conservative is that, in my view at least, a lot of what we were founded to do and a lot of the back catalog formed a coherent vision for what a conservative politics should be. It puts the interest of Main Street over Wall Street. It puts the middle Americans first. That's a lot of the basis for this book. In the book, we have four main issue areas that we talk about. An America first approach to foreign policy, a political economy, as I mentioned, that puts Main Street over Wall Street. American culture, which we lump immigration into because I think it needs to be in the context

of defending and defining an American culture and then faith and family. Any sort of conservative politics, in my view, that's worthwhile needs to be strongly socially conservative and defending those bedrock civilizational tenants of faith and family. I guess I would explain Main Street Conservatism by going to those four issue buckets first, which I'm sure we can unpack and get into as well. Helen, for you, this audience is a mix of inside baseball, DC, conservative world folks and also people who have not been within 500 miles of the capitals. Can you introduce the American Conservative specifically as a publication? Absolutely. The American Conservative is the magazine that has been right all along when everybody else was taking conservatism in the wrong direction. I think in the last five years, pretty much since Donald Trump came onto the scene, there has been a strong and an urge on the right to rethink a lot of the things that led us in a wrong direction and created the space for Trump to arise. People started thinking, hey, hang on, maybe we've been getting foreign policy really wrong since the Iraq War. Maybe trade policy, maybe we've harmed ourselves and consigned vast swaths of the country to economic degradation

for the sake of a few extra GDP points. Maybe we've been going in the wrong direction on immigration.

All of the issue areas where realignment thinking, fresh thinking on the right, is most alive right now are the issues where TAC has been, they're basically coming around to where TAC has been for the last 20 years. If you were to sum up a lot of this fertile fresh thinking in a sentence, it would be maybe Pat Buchanan was right all along. If you're an ordinary person out there who thought that Pat Buchanan made some pretty good points back in the 90s, whatever happened to him and people who thought like him, the answer is TAC, the answer is Main Street Conservatism. We are frankly delighted that so many people are now coming around to where we have

always been. It's interesting, Emil. You started with your joking point about everyone's identifying their own version of conservatism. This takes us to the 2000s. The two who are going to be aware of this history, but the whole George J. E. Bush, he runs as a compassionate conservative, and conservatives to his right typically don't like adding the word compassionate to conservatism. They think conservatism should stand alone. Why do you need to add the modifier? It suggests that there's a version of conservatism that isn't compassionate. It suggests that conservative values in all the different areas have some sort of flaw. I'd love to hear from the two of you. A, what's just your reflection on that 2000s era? Do we need to add a hyphen when we're trying to respond to Bill Clinton really dominating the 1990s? Then forwarding to today, what do you think about what adding the term Main Street says about the rest of what people would address as traditional conservatism? I mean, I actually think if you look back and you can talk with our founding editor, Scott McConnell, about this, the very name of our publication in some ways addresses that ours was a reclamation project. We felt that the good name of conservatism had been hijacked by people who actually were not very conservative. I think if you look through this anthology as well, that strain runs throughout all of the sections. It's there with Pat Buchanan talking about how these hubristic wars of choice, remaking the world in our image, is of a piece with creative destruction here at home, which is not a conservative principle. I think because of the way that the right has gone, we've had to throw these labels in front of conservative to kind of distinguish what we mean. But the very genesis and the very name of our publication to me is an attempt to say there is an authentic conservatism that shouldn't need a preface to it. And that's what you'll find in this book. But of course, it's a little ironic then that we threw Main Street on it, which I think speaks still to, you know, we can say that we were right from the beginning. I completely agree with that. But we still have work to do. And that was another thing that in recent years has really struck home to me, is that for all the talk of a realignment and for what the Trump moment meant, there's still a lot of work to do. There are still vestiges of the mid-2000s conservatism, especially throughout Washington, that would really just relish return

to those pre-2016 days. Marshall, I'm so glad that you brought up the Bush era domestic policy side, the self-proclaimed compassionate conservatives, because so many people think of TAC as having been founded in opposition to foreign policy neo-conservatives. And that's absolutely true, we were. But we were equally skeptical of the domestic policy side in the Bush White House at the time. The people who, as you say, felt the need to temper the word conservative with the word compassionate, as if those two were somehow antonyms. And I think, frankly, if you will

indulge me a moment of unseemly vindication and smugness, I think the career trajectories of those individuals speak for themselves. If you look at the people who were supposedly the voices for evangelical Christian America, for example, in the Bush White House, you're talking about people like Pete Wainer, who is now the House anti-Trump voice over at the Atlantic. I think those people are, too, a man, never Trumpers today and effectively mouthpieces for the Democratic Party. So back then, there were a lot of people who looked at them and thought, you seem kind of your squishes, folks, despite all of your loud proclamations of your evangelical commitments. You seem like you're a little bit ashamed of not just the things you believe, but the people you represent. That's not cool. But of course, they had enough conservative bona fides at the time that a lot of people were willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. I think time has told the tale on those people that they were the people who, during their years in power, sold out true conservatism on things like enforcing the border and immigration, or even things like George W. Bush's housing policy, trying to get more and more people into mortgages, which had its own compassionate motivations and ill-considered secondary effects and bad consequences. So yeah, no, I think those people were equally wrong, and we're very glad to have opposed them then and all the more so now that they are Democrats in all but name. This actually gets us to the realignment question, because this is definitely an issue which I've shifted all over the place over the course of the show, since we kind of kicked it off with J.D. Vance before he was a senator, obviously, in 2019 at the NatCon conference. And over time, I've become less and less convinced that the, let's say, best faith case realignment perspective on, let's say, the economic side is possible. And I think a lot of listeners definitely are going to feel that. They're going to say to themselves, and look, regardless of how people feel about LGBTQ issues, DEI, CRT, it seems as if the right has found a way to retain the deficit, hawkery and austerity politics when Democrats are in power. And then also, lean into the culture war side of things, but not actually pivot their politics more towards Main Street. It's kind of seeing, wow, you've kind of found a way to just be hardcore and like, let's say, Chris Rufo adjacent on social issues. Lean in once again, you could agree with that, like, yay or nay, but then not have to actually pivot your economic program in the way that some of the S's here were described. So how is the two of you kind of respond

to not even, it's not even a critique of your work, just a concern that folks definitely have. I don't know if you want to take that first.

Yeah, no, I share your frustration, Marshall, that the realignment has talked a good game so far on moving away from a GDP first, you know, free trade at all costs, markets, uber Alice kind of simplified zombie Reaganist conservatism, but that it has been really, really hard to turn that into policy so far. But my lesson that I take away from the past few years of watching that happen is not that it's impossible, but just that it's really hard, you know, we're turning around an aircraft carrier, there's a lot of institutional momentum. I think that people like JD Vans have been thinking about this for a really long time, but you know, he's only been a senator for at this point a few days. So I think it has taken a lot more effort to get in a place to actually turn some of that fresh thinking into policy. Maybe then we anticipated at the beginning, we thought we would maybe be able to persuade some people and bring them around to our way of thinking on the economic realignment, the way that we did on foreign policy. It's been a little bit harder than that,

but I'm optimistic. And I think give it another few years. I think we need at least at least one JD Vans Senate term before I'm willing to call the economic realignment project something that I'm ready to give up on. And I think a lot of this, I'll let you go and I'll ask the modified version after. Yeah, no, sure. I mean, look, I think a lot of this echoes what we were discussing earlier on the foreign policy side as well is that like, you know, it looked there was a ton of energy in the Trump moment, 16 through 19 or so. But the entrenched sort of institutions of official conservatism are still very powerful. But at this point, I mean, I would just point to the progress that Warren Cass and American Compass have made, right? I mean, like they are not only, you know, very influential now being talked about in huge journals and everything, they're also hosting events at the Heritage Foundation. I mean, what's happening at Heritage, I think is a really great indicator of the progress that we're making here too. So, you know, I think that that energy in the early Trump years, in some ways, made us think that this realignment was more inevitable than it really was. But I think we're still seeing a lot of progress across all of these issues. So here's the question then for the two of you. How does a right-leaning listener who is leaning all into the realignment, how do they separate, let's say, realignment rhetoric from actual action that's meaningful? Because I think how when you put this very well, very well stated, it's now conventional wisdom on the GOP side for someone like Ted Cruz, who very much fashioned himself as a recognized traditional conservative in 2013, as the GOP is the party of the working class. You were just going to genetically say that, moving forward. And what I was getting out of my comment about CRT is that that has now made it so that you can be the most Cato Institute straightforward, economically mainstream conservative, but also say things like, look at these professional managerial class culture warriors on the left, I'm fighting them, I'm fighting for the working class, yet still prioritized tax cuts to quote you, how an Uber Alice. So how do we kind of separate or how do you suggest someone think about that dilemma? The proof is always in the results. I think it was a little more than halfway through Trump's presidential term, his first presidential term, that we saw that wage growth was sort of contrary to previous trends, now strongest in the lowest quintile of American wage earners. So the people at the bottom of the ladder were seeing their wages grow faster than the rest of the economy. And that was a sign. I mean, there wasn't really any one policy you could hang that on. But it was consistent with Trump's overall goals of strengthening American manufacturing and limiting immigration so that those workers, specifically at the bottom of the ladder, are no longer facing ceaseless competition from low wage labor from south of the border. It was just a lot of little things that he did that added up to a very rosy picture. So I think that's that'll be the test, right, put us in power and see if we don't produce good results. The last time you did that, it did produce good results. So I think that's that's a good test. If you need a simpler litmus test than that, the border is always a good one for exactly the reason I just said. And by border you mean? And I just quickly, you know, I wouldn't discount the rhetorical win here. I mean, I totally take the point that we need to be careful about co-optation that, you know, we see this on the foreign policy side as well, everyone's a realist now, it means nothing. But I do think that that rhetorical shift is in and of itself a win, because the our ideological opponents who are so entrenched on the other side of that rhetoric will sort of self select out, which means that a lot of our ideological opponents

are no longer there to craft bad policy. So while yes, the co-optation threat is absolutely real, and as Helen said, we need to be on guard against that. I think we shouldn't discount the the the win that is that rhetorical shift of talking about being a working class party. I like bringing up the border because it gets to the dilemma of the Trump years. So Helen, if there's a litmus test on the border, what's the litmus test in your perspective? Is it miles of border wall constructed? Is it number of entries? Is it the rate at which asylum cases are processed and adjudicated in another direction? How would you think of like actually judging that? I love the wall and I want to see the wall. But I think remain in Mexico, that policy did a lot more to clamp down on border overflow than anything else Trump did. And that's just kind of a clear intuitive measure that frankly, you know, President Biden probably could have got away with keeping it if he weren't so beholden to the radical open borders wing of his party. So yeah, no, remain in Mexico and those kinds of modifications to asylum processing. So yeah, you can be strong on the border without actually building the wall, although the wall is good too. How about you, Emil? Yeah, I think a big tell is the rhetorical tick of needing to go out of your way to praise legal immigration and then say, but we need to clamp down on illegal immigration. Our entire immigration system right now is such a mess. I mean, we've written about this in the magazine, there's former, our former editor, Bob Marion mentioned this, one of my first days at the American conservative that, you know, the history of American immigration policy is ebbs and flows, right? And we have gained from immigrants, we still do. But it needs to be looked at in the context of assimilation. And there's something about the 14% foreign-born number in this country where assimilation starts to kind of break. And historically, that's when we've clamped down, right? That's in the 1920s when we clamped down. And then you can ease up once we've assimilated these new arrivals. We're past that at this point. So I think that to me, a litmus test on the issue of immigration is, do you see the stress that, you know, just floods of new arrivals and unassimilated new arrivals as having on our communities? And are you willing to take that seriously enough to say, we need a comprehensive overhaul that obviously looks at illegal immigration, but also takes a serious look at our legal immigration system and really tries to slow down arrivals so that we can assimilate those already here. How do you define assimilated, especially when we're talking about legal immigrants? That is the question, right? I mean, we tried to get to the bottom of this a little bit with the American culture section. And I think that's the second piece. I like using you. You're telling me you didn't perfectly come down to the mathematical formula for that. Exactly. No, look, that is the second piece that needs to be clearly defined is like, what does it mean in 2022 to assimilate into this country? To me, a big sort of signifier of this is my hometown. I'm here in Northern Virginia and Herndon, Virginia. And when I grew up, I went to public high school and there was a large Hispanic community, El Salvadoran community, but it was sort of expected that they learned English, that they would try to mainstream into those classes, and that they would be around at the community events here in town. And now it's 10, 12 years later, and there's parts of town where you only have to speak Spanish. It's basically like San Salvador. I think that's really bad for the people seeking a better life here and for the people who have lived here their entire life. So I mean, that's just a very specific example. But to have assimilation, you would have a town where you don't have two communities living under the same legal jurisdiction. I think that's bad

for everybody involved. How about you, Helen? How would you define it? Because obviously, your two are coming from different personal backgrounds. Yeah. In fact, in my experience with immigration personally has been spending many years of my life in predominantly Asian neighborhoods, both here in the United States, where I grew up in the research triangle area of Raleigh, North Carolina. And when I moved to Sydney, the place where I lived there was in Sydney's Koreatown. And so that gives me an alternate perspective on the immigration question compared to all of the cliches in the American discourse which tend to involve Hispanic immigrants. My experience with Asian immigration going to a public high school that was at least half Asian has left me with a very favorable impression of Asian immigrants. They were always my dear friends. But it taught me one lesson that I have brought to the immigration debate ever since. Very often, people try to measure assimilation by material achievement. That is, the first generation of Hispanics have very low educational attainment, but more of their kids graduate from high school, and then their grandkids graduate from college, and that's a sign that they're assimilating. Or they say first generation immigrants from south of the border tend to have very low incomes, but their children have higher incomes and their grandchildren have even higher incomes than that. So they're moving in the right direction. They're moving up the ladder of education and income. And that's how we measure assimilation, that and they all speak English now, which they tend to do so. Living among Asian immigrant populations, I was able to observe communities that scored very highly or scored very high on all of the metrics that I just listed. Their educational attainment is high when they showed up, high among the parents who immigrated and high among their kids and grandkids, higher in most cases, even than white natives. Incomes also higher than white natives. So by those metrics, Asian immigrants would seem to be doing extremely well. They don't need to assimilate. Assimilation would be a step down in terms of income or educational attainment. But living in those communities, you notice different cultural values, different cultural norms that are similar to what you hear from people working in places where there are a lot of H-1B visas. People in the software industry will observe cultural differences in the workplace, in workplaces that are dominated by Indians or Indian Americans versus other workplaces dominated by Native white Americans. And I feel like assimilation has to account for those differences too, because many of those cultural differences are the things that hamper economic growth in their Native countries. They are the reason why India is not an economic power to compare with the United States. So that was a long way of saying that assimilation can't just mean economic flourishing and learning English. It has to mean assimilating to American values. And this is where this gets incredibly interesting. Amila, in your opening preface, which I really enjoyed, you say that not enough folks within the conservative movement are asking the question of what are we trying to preserve here, to conserve here? And when it comes to this question of assimilation, you don't have to be coming from the New York Times op-ed page to say, okay, so what are you assimilating into? Because obviously, pre-1840s America, which has far fewer German immigrants, which has far fewer Catholic immigrants, obviously looks different than even 1890s America. And there are plenty of people on the right who would say, yeah, 1890s America is probably more this, this or that better than 2023 America. So what would you kind of say? What is the America that the two of you would like to

conserve and have folks assimilate into? We'll start with you, Amila, because you're the preface writer. Yeah, I mean, again, that is the question, right? But there's also many on the right at this point, I think, who just think the country's completely lost. We may need to go our separate ways, move to red states, things like that. I'm not quite there yet, because I still do think that there is a coherent enough, coherent and distinctly enough American culture that still exists here that's worth defending. It's something that is accessible to anyone of all backgrounds, right? And it's a very weak culture, though. I mean, I would say that too, that it's, you know, unlike the old world in Europe, where you have these civilizations and cultures that go back centuries, if not more, we're a young country. So we're inherently going to have a weaker culture. But if you point to, and I think, again, like a lot of this is local in this country, because it's the country's basically just too big, in my opinion. But if you point to sort of, you know, local festivals, we'll follow up on that later. I'm a localist at heart. But, you know, you look, you point to sort of the summer fairs that have always existed in this country. That's a uniquely American thing. The sort of civic holidays of Thanksgiving in the 4th of July. I've quoted this too often, but I'm a huge country music fan. And one of my favorite ways to answer this is a 2009 song, I believe, from Rodney Atkins called It's America. And he's sort of defining why he loves this country. And he doesn't go back to the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence.

He names things like it's a high school prom. High school proms don't really exist anywhere else in the world. Spring scene song, you know, the specific American music that we have, a ride in the Chevrolet, a lemonade stand, one nation under God, our sort of Christian heritage. So again, these are, these can be seen as sort of trivial, weak, you know, pop culture markers. I actually think they're really important, especially in a country like ours that is so young, and that has people who come here from such diverse backgrounds. We need something, some sort of a unified culture

to unite us. And I do think that that still exists. You see it in these sort of, you know, seemingly trivial cultural markers that Rodney Atkins gives a shout out to.

Helen, do you have a country music song for us, or you tell it through a different way?

Oh, I love country music so much. You know, there was a wonderful piece in the Atlantic a several years ago now by Raihan Salam on the phenomenon of assimilation and Asian immigration. And the gist of the article was that you it may frustrate conservatives that so many woke activists are Asian immigration or Asian immigrants or the children of Asian immigrants. But, and this was Raihan's point, this is actually an indication of their assimilation. They are assimilating into whiteness. So they are bashing America and saying how horrible America is from a woke perspective saying it's a terrible racist society, not because their real loyalty is to India or China, but because that's what they see their peers doing. And that's what they're assimilating into. I think there is a strong temptation on on the on the right, especially the cultural right to kind of shrug and say, Well, I guess that's right, I guess that's an American culture now. I dissent from that strongly. And I'll and I'll tell you a story. Back when I was in college, I went through a phase of saying, you know, I don't even identify as an American, right? Like North Carolina, that's a community that's that I can get my head around. I know what that means. I feel like I have something in common with the other people from that area, you know, a regional identity. Okay, I can, I can, I can understand that. But

I don't feel like I have anything in common with, you know, liberal New Yorkers or just America's just too big. That's not a community that I feel like I can identify with and be sure that I have something in common with other people who have that identity. And a friend of mine who grew up in Hong Kong, just slapped me across the face and said, Helen, you idiot, travel internationally, I promise you, if you walk into any bar and there are other Americans there, you will be able to spot them in 30 seconds flat. There's just something about Americans that, you know, if you are ever in a position where you actually have to pick an American out of the crowd, I bet that you can. And that that kind of set me on a path of thinking more seriously about the cultural markers that make Americans so different. And actually moving to Australia and spending seven or eight years in residence there was also very useful because Australia is a place that people think of as being culturally very similar to America. But they're, you know, the stereotypes they have about Americans are all basically right. And what are some examples of those? Oh, they were loud. Oh, they were bossy, that we just show up and like start ordering people around like, all right, take charge, you do this, you do that. Australian culture is much more consensus based. And, you know, well, I'm going to put my hand up and maybe this is an idea. But I just was trying to brainstorm three really quick cultural examples. One is egalitarian. Americans have this idea. And actually, especially in the workplace, like, I'm just as good as you, I don't care if I'm the low guy on the totem pole. If I feel like I have an opinion that can contribute to this conversation, I'm going to throw it out there. If I feel like if I really feel like my boss is wrong, I'm going to speak up in the meeting and say so. Oh, man, that is not universal in the cultures of the world. You know, this idea that, you know, it's what you have to say, not who you are or what position you're saying it from that matters. That kind of egalitarianism is definitely not universal. The second is civil society. Like, if there's a problem in our communities, we get together and do it ourselves. Whereas in many other cultures, Latin American cultures, for example, your reaction to observing a problem in your community would be to find a patron, right, like find a politician or some kind of boss and appeal to him and say, you please fix it, as opposed to just getting your friends together and doing it yourselves. And the third is opinionated, which is very much an Australian stereotype of Americans, like we're always sounding off about what we think. Well, you know what, it's my right as an American to have an opinion about pretty much anything I want, and to voice it if that's what I feel like doing, which again, not universal in the cultures of the world. So egalitarian, do it yourself, and opinionated. Those are very American things that play out in a lot of little different ways, but they add up. They really add up. I smirked when you said that, Helen, because I instantly imagined with your vocal intonation that Karen at the heart of the American political system with everyone needing to be heard. I want to hit something that the two of you both said independently, which is this idea of like localism versus bigness. This is interesting just in the sense of like, AOC obviously the United States is one of the biggest countries in the entire world. This gives us all sorts of benefits, natural resources, diversity, and the best sense of that term. We're obviously in our own hemisphere aside from Europe and Asia, this comes into the foreign policy side of things. But where do you think about this, especially starting with you, Emil, this local versus national direction? Because we usually hear this conversation, sense of globalism versus nationalism, but because of our regional and state-centric system, there's also like a deeper layer beyond that kind of cliché. So

talk to me more about localism. How are we not local enough, and what would you see a better version of that looking like? Yeah, I mean, I actually totally agree with Helen on that idea of you go abroad and you immediately know that someone's a fellow American. I'm from Virginia, if someone there was from California, you immediately have a kinship there. My concern is that because the country is so big, a lot of the commonalities can just sort of devolve to the level of abstraction. And this is where your question about globalism versus nationalism versus localism gets really interesting to me. A lot of us on the right are rightly concerned about globalism. I count myself chief among them. It sort of pushes away from the concrete relationships and values and virtues that root us in our lives. And it sort of makes us pursue abstractions rather than actually helping people in front of us. So anyways, I'm not a fan of globalism at all. My concern with sort of making nationalism the endpoint is that that makes a ton of sense in a place like Hungary. But what does that mean in a country of 330 million people? I think in many ways, an American nationalism poorly defined can have the same pernicious effects as we see globalism having globally right now, right? Which is why, for me at least, I want to push past in many ways the return to nationalism instead root us in the most concrete place possible. That is our family, our friends, our communities that have made us who we are. So in some ways, my sort of argument for localism is more aspirational than actually accurate given the way this country is right now. If we could at least reclaim something benign that unites us as Americans rather than just wokeness, that's a huge win. But in the perfect world, if we can instead derive our sort of political sensibilities from something far more concrete, something far more real, I think that, and especially in a modern world that's just chafes against anything permanent, I think that's a much healthier basis for our political community, especially in a country this big. I want to go to something you brought up, Helen. You were talking about zombie Reaganism. And there's kind of in this interesting, I frankly think non cringe, if you push it in the right direction, kind of Reagan rebirth in terms of appreciating, I think Reagan as a president. So this isn't almost at a policy level, but I think something Reagan brought to the conservative movement was, and I sound like a John Meacham cliché, but he did bring an optimism about the American project. Because it seems like something that's been very frustrating on a lot of the more popular sides of things. Maybe this is me just being too online on Twitter. But this unhealthy demerism that at its best, kind of like the Reaganite instinct, which could go a bunch of different directions on policy, would kind of guard against. So I would love for you to just hit for you first, Helen, to kind of talk about Reagan, your thoughts on him, and kind of how is it possible to sort of separate the very 1980s policy from almost like maybe there was something politically also don't forget to like Reagan is winning presidential majorities at a level which modern conservatism is just not capable of doing. So how would you think about the Reagan dynamic aside from just the zombie Reaganism critique of tax policy? I too am coming around on our oldest president bar now, I guess, Biden. Reagan was a more complicated figure than he's painted as being. And I was reminded of that late last year when Wells King of the American Compass published a case study with American Compass on one of Reagan's trade policies aimed at the Japanese car industry. Specifically, he coerced Japanese companies into building factories on US soil to employ US workers. And it was a show of muscle. It was definitely contrary to free trade dogma, but it had the desired effect and worked out really well for American workers in the long run.

So even people who today hold up Reagan as being as exemplifying the kind of ideology we need to return to maybe would be surprised at the flexibility of their icon. But I do agree that his tone brought something that the country needed. And you know what, this may not be a popular opinion inside the Beltway, but the American politician who I think most recaptures that spirit is Donald Trump. Oh my goodness, that was like half the reason people liked him. It's because he was talking about making America great again. He was not talking about fiddling with tax policy. He was saying we as the country are going to, you know, the America's best days are not behind us. It was exhilarating and empowering and fantastic. I never understood why so many people on the left, where so many people on the left got this idea that Donald Trump was a negative or an angry figure. If you look at the people who like him, they like him because he's an optimist. That's his whole shtick, being optimistic. I mean, what about American part? I mean, I think the key counterpart would basically be the American

carnage speech, right? So what do you think of it? Okay, this is very interesting, right?

So this is where we get into the Trump the idea versus Trump the implementation.

I mean, I always think, you know, George Packer had this amazing interview with Peter Thiel back in 2013. This is part of the unwinding where Peter makes this. And this, by the way, is the Peter anecdote that makes me convinced that, okay, like the hype actually is real. I interviewed a lot of tech billionaires. Even the right reactionary ones are not as smart as people are kind of hyped to be. When Peter makes this insight, I thought this was so smart.

When he said, I actually think that people are not looking for pure optimism. We're looking for someone who could say this, this, this and that bad thing is happening. Call it out, confront it. And he's making the statement after the Romney, you know, America's comeback team thing kind of piddles out. So that's the kind of a interesting, I guess we're kind of I guess what I'm kind of getting at when I was was checking you there how and is that Trump contains multitudes and that he has, we're going to win Trump. But he also has American carnage Trump. And that never I think was

ever properly reconciled for good or for ill. Yeah, but that's true of Reagan as well. I mean, Reagan was very much about teaching America that our foes are real. And freedom is only ever one generation away from being extinguished. So we're playing with real stakes here, people. Things could

get really dark. And we could all be living in communist prison colonies one generation from now and there will be no coming back from that. So be good. There was that strain to Reagan too.

And that's what I saw in Trump. Yeah, what do you so A, your thoughts on Reagan, but B, to Helen's point of invoking optimistic aggressive 2015 2016 MAGA, like what are what are you like as a Main Street conservative, like looking from politicians and as a class, as a cohort, as a group, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera? Yeah, I mean, I guess I don't see that much daylight or contradiction between make America great again and American carnage.

And also, if you go back to Reagan, you know, the juxtaposition that Helen was just alluding to, it just seems to me that the thread that runs through it is a genuine affinity for this country and its people. Helen mentioned before that far too many politicians really don't like the people voting for them when it comes down to it. They're kind of embarrassed by large swaths in this country.

They would never be seen with a gaudy red hat that you could have bought at the Cabela's or something. And when I look at Reagan and Trump and both the, you know, real optimism that I agree with Helen that both of them had, but then also the areas in which they were warning about dangers, it's from the perspective of, hey, these people in this country that I really care about, you know, we're going to make things great for you. But to do that, we need to care about, you know, the carnage in our industrial base that the political class has kind of just completely turned the other way on. So yeah, I don't know. I guess I don't see much contradiction between these things. And to me, that's the through line. So another question I would have, we're talking about the border, we're talking about from 2015, 2016. It seems to me, though, as a person who just surveys people movements, et cetera, that in many ways, the key to Republican victory in 2024, or to a conservative victory is not going to be just like repeating 2016, catechisms, especially as they become almost cliché. So if the central claim of y'all's body of work is that in many ways, like the work of TAC really pressures the issues that define 2016, what do you see as defining 2024? Maybe things are similar, but I just don't get the sense that we're going to be fighting the border wall fight quite in the same way. It won't have the same resonance. It won't have the same significance. I think Trump talking about globalism would not ring in the same way as it did in 2016. So how do you think about that starting with you, Howan? I think the three policy areas of MAGA were immigration, trade, and foreign policy. I think immigration will be equally salient. I mean, you have more people coming across under Biden than you did under second term Obama. And the visuals of people just streaming across the border unimpeded. Those are on the news just as frequently as they were. So I don't think, I think we probably sadly are still talking about the border in almost exactly the same way. Trade, one of Trump's great accomplishments was getting even the Democratic party and even the ultra capitalists in his own party to acknowledge that somewhere we took a wrong turn on China, right? I think there is now a consensus, a bipartisan consensus, that the well-being of America requires standing up to China to one extent or another. Whereas before Trump, I think that was not at all, you could not have said that. So now that we're all kind of on the same side, we can hash out what exactly that should look like, whether, you know, the action on chips that the Biden administration has taken is in the right direction or the wrong direction. But like, that's a good place to be that we're now just haggling over specifics. And we're all basically agreed that giving China its way on everything as was done in the first decade or two of this century was probably a bad idea. So we're in a better place, MAGA, on that one. And on the third, foreign policy is more salient now than it was in 2016, even than it was in 2020, because we have a war. We have a war going on in Ukraine. And one of the two parties seems dead set on escalating that to, you know, there are lots of powerful people in the Democratic Party who won't be happy until we have regime change in Russia. So providing a check on that is even more important now than it was in the last two elections where MAGA was before the American people. So, yeah, no, I think I think MAGA continues to be the right policy agenda for the Republican Party, maybe even more so now than it was last time around. How about you, Emil? Yeah, I mean, I totally agree. I was going to say Russia-Ukraine is the one thing we haven't touched on yet. That's going to loom really large in 24, in my view. And I think you're going to see a real fight over it. I mean, we mentioned before, you know, it seemed that things had kind of turned our way after 2016. There was all this

energy. The big wake-up call to me, one of the big wake-up calls on foreign policy that said we still have a lot of work to do was the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Obviously, no one's defending Putin's invasion there, but the rush to get the United States involved with a proxy war with the nuclear on power by all the same people who were the architects of the Iraq war who rushed to get us involved there was really telling to me. And I think that you're going to see a big debate over this in the Republican primary. I'm encouraged to see we have new members of Congress right now. I mean, JD Vance right out the gate is asking for accountability on where all these billions of dollars have gone, regardless of how you feel about aid to Ukraine. I think that's a no-brainer. The fact that a lot of people aren't getting on board with that, I think tells us a lot. But he's not alone, right? You have Dan Bishop signing on to that. You have Josh Hawley signing on to that. So I think this is going to be a big flash point of the 24 primary on the right. And in my view, obviously, hopefully we have some people some people urging restraint in this conflict. Yeah. And obviously, I mean, not obviously, but listeners know that I'm kind of on a different side of the Ukraine debate than you guys are. So I'm just kind of like noting that to not appear to be disingenuous. But then also this isn't a debate show. So we don't have to do that. But here's what I am curious about.

Very straightforward. I understand where you're coming from in the Ukraine thing. I would like to hear how you two reconcile the Taiwan slash China side of that intervention debate. Because I do not think enough, right? Because to your point, Emil, everyone's calling themselves a realist now, especially on the right. Yet I see folks on the one hand saying, this, this, this and that about Ukraine, interventionist policy, nuclear risk, all those things are to assume they're in good faith. But in many ways, many of their arguments apply, I think even more of a scaled up level to Taiwan, China, Cold War Two. How do you two think about this kind of dynamic? How does the like restraint side approach the Taiwan and China question? Because basically, the way they're all put it is, I see a bunch of folks who on the one hand say, we aren't pouring enough attention into Asia. This isn't Bridge Coy by the way. I like Bridge a lot. Bridge is coming on the show. So this is an A. There's a lot of inside basers. So this is me sliding Bridge. But they'll say things like, we're risking a nuclear conflict in Ukraine. But we need to focus on China. Obviously, that also has a case for a nuclear conflict too. So how are the two of you basically thinking through the Taiwan, Ukraine distinction, dilemma, that different part?

I mean, to me, it's just simply that China is not China. You mentioned how to restrain or look at this. To me, at least there's some tension between a realist and restrained look at these issues. From a realist point of view, China is a rising power peer competitor to American interest, especially in East Asia with a lot of our allies there. Russia just isn't. And the other flip side to this to me too is, if we are concerned about a rising China, which I am, getting bogged down in Eastern Europe with a mid tier power like Russia is probably the last thing that we want to do. We need to be laser focused on the threat in the East. And that means reshoring right now. I don't want to get into a military conflict over Taiwan. I certainly do not. But to avoid that, we need to be laser focused on that and not getting bogged down in Eastern Europe. So to me, it's almost that because Russia and China are different, one is more powerful than the other, one is more of a threat to national interests. That's all the more reason that we shouldn't be getting involved in Ukraine. And instead, turning our attention to the threat from the East. Yeah, if there's one foreign policy thinker who you would give the crown

of Mr. Realist, it's John Meersheimer. And he's very much a we got to confront China kind of guy. And he's in and in spite of that has been at the forefront of people, probably maybe even more dovish on Ukraine than most people attack. So clearly, it is a long standing strain within the tech coalition that China is a serious threat in a way that Russia isn't. China threatens our vital national interests in a way that Russia doesn't. And that's why Taiwan is just a completely different animal than Ukraine. You know, something I'm curious about to bring it back to the 2002 Iraq war context. I'm having a bunch of kind of leftist, more progressive thinkers on foreign policy who push back against a lot of the great power competition, Cold War two context, we're not even talking about Ukraine, we're talking really about China. I wonder as two, you know, writers, editors, publishers at the conservative publication that really is rooted in opposition to the Iraq war, raising big questions about how, okay, 9 11s happened, there's a bunch of different paths we're on. If we get on this one, this, this, this, and that happens, which I think is pretty prescient on the case there. So that's where the street cred comes from. How do you look at this Cold War two great power competition of China? Like, what are warning signs for you? So like, bring your most 2002 energy to this book, what are you concerned about, given the the bipartisan hawkish, hawkish consensus that's starting to form?

I'm not sure I understand exactly. Basically, what I'm asking is, if it's 2002, September 11th has happened, the US has obviously been under attack by Al Qaeda, there's this broader, like, Islamist movement, which is explicitly said it's at war with the United States, we go into Afghanistan in the case to George W. Bush administration is making is preemptive war. And this is once again, the essay of it's in the attack essay preemptive war is the solution to keeping the US safe in the 21st century. Obviously, tack is writing against that sitting in the year 2023. There's an increasingly bipartisan consensus that we are almost inextricably tied into a hostile and potentially aggressive relationship with China. So given the spirit of tack issuing warnings against that preemptive process that we underwent in 2002, what does your most, let's say, PAPU canon spirit within you tell you, you would worry about when it comes to the US and China going into the new year?

I will give Emil time to ponder his answer while I give you what will probably be a very unsatisfying one, which is that I like your comparison, but I don't see the metaphor lining up the way that you do. The reason to be against preemptive war in Iraq was because of the unintended consequences. You could say Saddam Hussein, bad guy, Islamism, jihadism, real threat to America, but war with Iraq is going to make things worse on both of those fronts and give us a bunch of other problems that we didn't have before. When I think about unintended consequences, which for me is the most important trait of a conservative and especially attack style conservative is a sensitivity to unintended consequences. I think about China, but not China in 2023, when we're all kind of looking down from the bottom of the whole thinking, huh, we've dug ourselves in a hole here. I think about China in the year 2000 or in the 90s, and people realized that China was a growing power. She wasn't a backward giant anymore. She was getting stronger economically. The Deng Chaoping reforms were really just going gangbusters.

We were going to have to deal with China, and a lot of people said, well, we need to deal with China by becoming more economically integrated with them. The more economically integrated we are

with them, the more likely it will be that they will move in our direction and she will have a peaceful rise and they will become more democratic. They'll get a taste of freedom and say, wow, freedom, that's great. We need more of that here. We will democratize China by trading with them. That, to me, was the time for attack-like voice to talk about unintended consequences, saying, well, are all the factories that we're going to be building over there ones that we're going to have to tear down here because that doesn't seem great. Outsourcing our manufacturing base to a place with lower wages that might grow up to be a threat, that doesn't seem wise. Are we really, really sure that this is going to lead to political liberalism in China? Do we think that it is so obvious that our way is superior, that they're going to just throw away millennia of their own traditions and hop on board with liberalism circa 2000? That doesn't seem obvious to me either. Trying to deal with geopolitical problems without thinking about unintended consequences was what led us into the Iraq war, but that's also what led us into our current predicament with China. We are now in the unenviable position of having to figure out what to do about China after two decades of having gone down the wrong path.

The time to think about unintended consequences regarding China was 20 years ago.

Yeah. I suppose you asked what concerns me about the bipartisan and hawkish consensus that's forming around China. I say the main thing is that we'll only look for military solutions. I mean, this seems to be somewhat of what we did in post-911 years, right? We're like, which countries can we go invade and overthrow? It's a different situation here because we're talking about a rising China, but you have a lot of people, it seems to me, who are rightly concerned about the China threat, who are only proposing military solutions, who are unwilling to revisit the economic integration that Helen mentioned, unwilling to talk about reshoring, to talk about arming allies. They want to keep American troops on Okinawa instead of helping Japan to actually take the lead there. To me, that's the main concern is that, yes, we should be rightly concerned about China, but you either have to be willing to actually put military force to defend Taiwan or to right now work economically to disentangle. It seems like a lot of the people who are concerned about the China threat are unwilling to do the latter. I think that's a great final section that gets at the core of the debate moving forward. Let's close with this. Obviously, Emilio, you pointed this out, there are four categories of essays in the anthology, foreign policy, American culture, political economy, and faith and family. Could each of you just offer one or two or three or four, pick whatever categories you want, pick whichever essays, that you think folks would really get a kick out of if they do what they're supposed to do and purchase the anthology. Helen, do you want to take this or should I take it first?

This is a test of how aggressively you do edit this, basically. Name me five essays.

I mean, I can hop in. I'm a social conservative at heart. That's the drive to my conservatism. That's why I'm on the right. I think, as I mentioned before, any worthwhile conservatism needs to be unabashedly defending the family and religious institutions in this country, particularly our Christian heritage. There's a ton in the faith and family section that I would point to. I think it's easy to forget how live the marriage debate was until it was abruptly ended with Obergefell. We have a lot of great essays in there, really red meat stuff that gets to the heart of why so many social conservatives really cared about this. Talking about a lot of the consequences that we'll see if we redefine marriage. Margaret McConnell has a great piece there that talks about how redefining marriage denies the ideal that no parent should abandon

his child. We see this now with surrogacy. We see this with adoption. There's a horrific story just the other day. These poor kids who are abused, they are adopted by a same-sex couple. So yeah, real red meat stuff in there, I'm sure may rub some people the wrong way. But the heart of my conservatism is social conservatism. So I would absolutely recommend people go revisit those pieces no matter where you're at on these really hot button issues. I think that reminding ourselves how live this debate was and how people thought of the stakes of these debates is worthwhile for everyone across the political spectrum.

You know, I'll just say real quick how in the real tragedy of that answer, Emil, is that I thought you were going to say the second time the real heart of my conservatism is rubbing people the wrong way and I was excited. But you did not take the lay-up opportunity to you, Ellen, to close this out. Yeah, I'll pick a nice one and a spicy one. The nice one is that it's easy to forget living on the coasts that agriculture is a massive part of the American economy. But it's the lifeblood of a lot of people who live in a lot of states that we don't visit very often. And that the agricultural sector has been, in many ways, prey to the same economic forces of consolidation and globalization as manufacturing. And it's the same story playing out with the same negative consequences. And it's something that people who don't live in agricultural areas just don't think about very often. But it's a fascinating story.

Gracie Olmsted is someone who was actually a one-time TAC staffer. Gracie is delightful. She had a book out a few years ago that was also really good. But this article of hers is called Seeding Control. Seeding SEED. And it's about how big agriculture has taken control of what used to be

something that was, you know, a farmer could self-sufficiently get for himself. And that was his seeds. That consolidation and big ag have really zeroed in on genetically modified crops as being a sort of locus of control, a way to control the agricultural sector in a way that has not always worked out well for individual farmers. And so Gracie has a wonderful long essay on that.

And then the other one is the last piece in the anthology. So you'll have to read all the way to the very end to get to it. But it is in some ways the most controversial piece that is in there, certainly one of the most controversial pieces that has been published during my time as editor of The Print Magazine. And that is The Meaning of Harvey Weinstein by my friend Matthew Schmitz. Matthew Schmitz is like me, a social conservative, a conservative for whom religion and values are important. And so for that reason, not what you would think of as a likely friend of Harvey Weinstein and what he stands for. But one thing that Matthew Schmitz does care about is the rule of law and due process. And he sees the Me Too movement as being, on the one hand, very eager to deal in feminist moral binaries. If you're a woman, you're good and we should believe you. And if you're a man, you're a predator and we shouldn't listen to anything you say. And also he sees Me Too as sacrificing really important safeguards that have been built up over centuries, literally centuries of the evolution of the law in the common law system that exist for a reason. And they're just willing to throw them out because they think, you know, men are bad guys or Harvey Weinstein's a bad guy. That piece persuaded me that the New

York trial that resulted in Harvey Weinstein's conviction was deeply flawed. And like I said, I'm somebody who was not predisposed to think well of Harvey Weinstein. So it's a fascinating piece on not allowing our prejudices to get in the way of what should be deeper commitments to fairness

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and the rule of law. Agriculture to Harvey Weinstein, that is the definition of delivering on the nice and spicy promise. Guys, this has been really great. Like once again, I really recommend this anthology to folks, but I also think that folks in the audience who are interested, even I especially recommend this book if you're coming from like the center left, especially, because I think there are people, you two are no doubt aware of this, this kind of like superficial, kind of lazy, like the pop is right and the pop is left to the exact same. Like you're, they're going to be predisposed to believing this is what the right is thinking about things. But I think folks in the center left should like read this to get a better understanding of those categories, because they're a less obvious and they're also not going to be ones that you are going to be necessarily open to hearing. If you're on the left, you definitely want to hear everyone is going against Wall Street now. So center left audience specifically, I'm really calling you guys out to check the anthology out. Emil and Helen, thank you so much for joining me on the realignment. Thank you. Enjoyed it. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year or \$500 for a lifetime membership rates. See you all next time.