

[Transcript] The Realignment / 340 | Is a "Bill of Obligations" the Answer to America's Turmoil? with Richard Haass

Marshall here. Welcome back to the Realignment.

Before we dive into today's episode, we're back from our Realignment live show, Breaking Points show in Austin, and Tuesday's live response to President Biden's State of the Union on the Breaking Points YouTube channel. So that means Sagar and I are coming back with our supercast, subscriber questions and answers. Next week, we've got some great questions on the page. If you'd like to get access to next week's episode, go to realignment.supercast.com where you can subscribe to support the show and access other exclusive content.

Today's guest is Dr. Richard Haas, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, Richard served in the State Department, Pentagon and the White House under four Republican and Democratic presidents. Up until now, his writing and work has focused on America and the world. His new book though, *The Bill of Obligations*, *The Ten Habits of Good Citizens*, is focused much more on what's happening internally. So despite the obvious conversations and concerns about China and Russia, he argues in the book that the greatest threats to America come from within. So the conversation today focuses on civics, democracy and what Americans owe one another as citizens. Huge thank you to Lincoln Network for supporting the show. I hope you all enjoy the conversation.

Richard Haas, welcome to the realignment. Good to be with you.

I hate starting an interview with a question that literally every previous interviewer has asked you, but I am going to do it for the sake of clarity and really explaining your position in the role. What is the origin of this book? What got you thinking about a more domestically-centric topic as opposed to the type of foreign policy work you do at CFR?

It wasn't something I planned. It was more for something I stumbled across that whenever I was asked that question that I invariably get asked after I talk about China and Russia and North Korea and Iran and climate change and what have you, people would always say, well, what really keeps you up at night? What worries you most? And more and more, my answer was us. I worry about

our ability to come together to get things done. I worry about the potential for politically inspired violence in this country. So after I gave that answer enough times, I figured the time had come to drill down on it and to basically look at what's going on internally in this country as a national security challenge. And so that is essentially my path to writing this book.

It's not something again I, five years ago, I would have imagined. It's like a lot of things in life. It's what happened. Something I'm curious about is the mental shift you had to make from a foreign policy-centric space to a domestic politics space, especially in this particular moment right here. What would you say are the two biggest just mental framework and implementation differences between the two spheres that you noticed?

I've never thought of it that way. I approach things analytically, so I'm not sure there's a big mental or conceptual difference. The biggest difference for me was, unlike foreign policy, which I've been focusing on now for 40, 50 years, and I feel pretty well schooled in it.

You can always know more, obviously, but I feel pretty comfortable with it. A lot of this was new to me. If I had ever read some of these things, like the Articles of Confederation, it was 50 or 60 years ago. I hadn't read the Federalists, and I don't know how many decades. I had never read most of the Supreme Court opinions that I read in the course of writing this book.

I had not read many of the inaugural speeches of the presidents. I had not read many of the

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farewell addresses of the presidents. This was a real education for me, which was great. I love the fact that I learned as much as I did in the course of writing this. Unlike foreign policy, I'm dealing with international issues where I come at it with much more of a background, and often the questions I'm asking or more was the word defined. In some ways, I was able to look at this as first-order questions, and a lot of it was fresh to me.

We're going to get into the obligations specifically a little later, but you raised this in a way that I think could get to one of them, like the idea of civics. As you just articulated, you just went through your own self-directed civics course here. Obviously, this episode is being recorded the week where there's been a lot of controversy with Florida college board standards, the African American studies AP history course. I think that's the perfect juxtaposition, the way you set this up in the sense that we can all agree, I'm assuming, that we should learn about the articles of confederation. You should read Washington's farewell address, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. What would you say, though, are the outer bounds of where we probably can't agree on what needs to be taught, and maybe there's going to be some difference in what Florida teaches versus what is taught in New York City public school? How do you think about those bounds?

That's a question I'm wrestling with a lot, and I think what's happened in recent years has made a difficult situation more difficult. The teaching of history, the teaching of civics has gotten much more politicized. It's almost getting weaponized, and I think that's really unfortunate. It's also accentuated differences between and among the states, which, again, goes against what we're trying to accomplish here. The idea is to come up with a national narrative. The idea that there's growing differences between New Jersey's narrative and Florida's narrative can't be a good thing, or between how Democrats see it. And Republicans, look, we already saw this year's the 1619 versus 1776 kinds of tensions. We've seen the, quote, parental rights movement. And this idea, you saw it in the Virginia gubernatorial race between Terry McAuliffe and Glenn Yonkin, and this whole question of parental involvement in curricular issues. So this has become a minefield. I get it. I still think, though, that before we start thinking about what you might call special approaches to history or narrow or focused approaches, whatever adjective you want to use, whatever hyphenated American group one wants to choose, I do think the initial focus ought to be on a totality history. Because, again, this was a country, I think it's important to constantly circle back to the fact that this was a country founded on an idea. We didn't always live up to the ideas or the ideals, but the whole idea was one of a quality of equal opportunity. We took in people from all over the world and, you know, wasn't a hereditary monarchy. It wasn't that your position was predicated on wealth. Though, again, I understand that for much of the first, what, 75 years of this country's existence, there were tremendous contradictions between principles and practice. And ultimately, we had to fight a civil war, have the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments and subsequent Amendments and legislation. So I'm aware of all that. But that is the essence of America, these concepts. And the, so I think history and civics ought to begin with that. And again, but no, I mean, you mentioned the African American issue. It's impossible to teach American history without having a significant component devoted to slavery. It was there from before the beginning, if you

will, there at the beginning, it was central to certain compromises at the constitutional convention. Obviously, it was central to the run up and the causality of the civil war. And it's part of our stories since and to use Lincoln's line, it's still part of our story. It's our unfinished work. So you can't tell the American story without including that. I actually think though, for most Americans, white and black alike, as a first take at American history, I'd like to see that be part of a lot of the larger history. Before one thinks about African American studies or hyphenated anybody studies, I worry that we need to get the basics. And then, no, then there's an interesting conversation. And how do you shape the basic narrative? And my own view, you're going to, I'm going to introduce something here that might seem odd. I thought about this a lot initially, not in the context of this country, but in the context of Northern Ireland. I've twice been involved in Northern Ireland's politics, once as the U.S. Envoy about 20 years ago. And then subsequently, about a decade ago, I was brought in by the parties of Northern Ireland, to help them sort out their continuing frictions. One of those frictions was this whole question of the legacy of the past. How did they deal with their own story? And Northern Ireland went through three decades of what were called the Troubles, basically from the late 60s to the late 90s, so I think it was between 3,000 and 3,500 individuals were killed. Obviously, tremendous conflict between and within communities. And one of the things I tried to do was to say, hey, if we're going to learn from the past, or if we're going to avoid repeating the past, I thought it was necessary to understand the past and to deal with its legacy. One of my many unsuccessful ideas was I said, why don't we have a museum of the legacy of the past, where we teach about the Troubles? And the idea would not be to come to a single narrative of Northern Ireland's history, which would be impossible between Protestants and Catholics. But could you come up with certain things that were simply factual? This event happened on this date. This was the situation. And then we could say, here's the competing interpretations of it. Here's how the principle, say, Catholic or you had to break it down more, what we're called Republican or Unionist or Loyalist or what have you, nationalist newspaper or individuals saw it at the time. And the idea, again, would be to expose people. Here's the facts and here's the various interpretations and analyses. And that's what got me thinking about the United States. Could we basically teach our history and say, here's the facts, here's what happened. And then there are differing interpretations. You'd want to expose people not to say, here's how you have to understand and not to impose a history, but to expose people to history and to have them read various competing interpretations. That's my sense. So I haven't given up on the idea of putting together a composite history. Indeed, it may be what I do next. When I think about an area I could maybe make a contribution in. I've gotten a little bit skeptical. I'll try to go on so long. I apologize. I've gotten skeptical in the short run about the ability to accomplish this at the federal level as frustrating as it is. Because again, the whole idea is to come up with a national story. But even the legislation that's been introduced in Congress to have federal funding for civics basically says nothing in this legislation should be interpreted as coming up with a single curriculum. So my guess is if you're going to do it, you may have to do it more from the bottom up at the state level. It's consistent with Brandeis' idea of states being the laboratories

of democracy. So I could imagine different states might have civics curriculum. Maybe some states would band together. And hopefully over time, you would build momentum towards something that was national, which has to be the goal. But I'm not going to sit here and say it's going to be quick or easy. And I do think that it's really gotten politicized. And that's unfortunate because we need this desperately. I think the fact that we don't teach our story is an age of failing. And it's one of the reasons that the country is facing some of the difficulties it is that Americans don't grow up anymore understanding their own history, don't understand why democracy is valuable, don't understand what it takes for democracy to endure or much less to thrive. Which again is why I wrote this book. It's sad that a book like this was necessary. But I do believe the absence of civics, either it's not taught or it's not taught well or it's taught and not required, which is the case at most of our colleges and universities. I think that's a major act of omission in America right now. And again, I apologize for going on so long. No, I mean, this is fresh. And like I said at the top, I didn't hear you go on on this specific bit in previous interviews. So new content is the goal we're starting with. I want to, I'm something, a couple of things I want to respond to. So one, when you're talking about like the museum of kind of like the past of history, especially in the Northern Irish context, what separates something that's history from something that's the present? Because like once again, not to harp too much on the College Board example, especially because you're not a specialist in African American history, one of the controversial bits in the curriculum was the inclusion of a discussion about Black Lives Matter and protests. That was 2020. That was 2014. That, you know, in both, I can see people on both sides of that issue, from either direction saying, this is bad, this is good, etc, etc, etc. So if we're thinking about this project, where is the delineating line between something that's current events and something we could discuss as history? I don't think there necessarily is. You have to always guard against what some would call the bias of recency, just because something is fresher in your mind doesn't mean it's more historically significant. So you have to ask yourself just because it looms large, how much of that, you have to ask yourself, do we think it will loom large in 10 years for 25 years or 50 years? Now historians have a great advantage. They have the passage of time. So it's very difficult, to be honest, to make such judgments. But I think you have to guard against both recency and both of its dimensions, that you emphasize too much the reason and you discount too much the distance. So that's just part of the challenge of getting it right. But I don't think it ought to be anything arbitrary. I don't think that just because 9-11 happened relatively recently in the scope of US history, I don't think we say, well, we're going to discount it because it was only 20 odd years ago. But it is a challenge to try to appreciate the significance of something before the passage of time demonstrates you're right, saying that this is particularly significant. But I don't think anything automatically ought to be ruled out simply because it happened a month ago or a year ago. I don't think things ought to be ruled. But it just forces those involved to say, why do we think this is that meaningful? Why do we think in 10 or 20 or 30 years, this will be looked at carefully or this should be looked at carefully? I think that's the way to go about it. You know, obviously, I'm sure this book went to print before the 2022 midterm result. But it seems to me from the perspective of reading it after the midterms, it seems like the scenario turned out as good as one could possibly hope in the sense that Ron DeSantis wins in Florida,

but he actually successfully wins. Democracy works in functions. You had outright election deniers like Kerry Lake-Lews in Arizona. There's just broad repudiation, at least at a campaign level of election denier rhetoric as not being particularly helpful. What will your reaction to those midterms? I'm not arguing this solves the problem, quote unquote, but it seems like the thing that needed to happen happened. And that could take us to the next step.

All in all, I agree with you. I thought it was a pretty good result. As you say, a lot of election deniers bit the dust. A lot of good people at certain secretaries of state who stood up for what is right and legal did not lose. All that's pretty good, needless to say. What wasn't so good was turnout, less than half the eligible voters in the United States voted. That to me was really disappointing given how much was at stake. And however you look back on what happened a few months ago in the midterms, it was just that. It was the midterms. A lot of the issues revolve around presidential politics. So again, the other piece of good news, in some ways even potentially larger, was the reform of the Electoral Count Act, got bipartisan support. And I think that strengthens our ability to manage what happens in two years. But I think that's the real test. The real test is in 2024, what's one of the real tests in 2024, whether we avoid having a situation where, for example, in a close presidential election, you have competing slates of electors in one or more states. And you have tremendous challenges to the perceived or actual legitimacy of the process and so forth. So we're not out of the wood jack because that's going to be one of the real tests. The other real test, I think, beyond that is between now and then, as well as after then, which is can we govern? We're going to have an interesting test on that in a couple of months on the debt seal. Can we get people to act responsibly there? Can we come up with a comprehensive response to our immigration challenges? And I got a long list of other issues. I could add to that in there.

I think the jury's out. I'll be generous. The jury is out. So when I think about the challenges facing our democracies, one is whether we can simply be functional, whether we can come together and compromise sufficiently to produce not perfect solutions, but at least legislation and policies that leave us better off.

That's one challenge for American democracy, we'll see.

And then secondly, can we get through the fundamental hurdles about the electoral process? In the 2024 elections, will it go smoothly? Will it be accepted? Will we re-establish the norm? And then in 2028 that losers concede. We have peaceful transfers of power and the like.

So we'll see. Can we avoid political violence in this country? Is January 6 going to be seen as a one-off? You asked about recent history. That's an interesting question.

Will January 6 come to be seen as a kind of curiosity?

In a one-off, essentially low point of American history?

The moment at which armed populism reached a zenith? Or will it be seen as a harbinger of the deterioration of American democracy where politically inspired violence became more and more frequent in commonplace? I don't have the answer to that question.

It's impossible to have that question. So I think there's a lot still about, has yet to play out.

So I don't feel sanguine. I feel neither confident nor pessimistic or defeatist. I just basically sit back and say, I don't assume it will all work out. I don't assume it won't.

Let's see, and more important, that's too passive. I believe it's important for good people to get involved, to increase the odds, good things happen. Something I'm curious about as you're

articulating this, and we will get to articulating the specific obligations, but I think we're hitting the themes of the book well. If we're looking at individuals, sort of the individual senators, members of Congress, governors, secretaries of states who made not just bad calls in the sense that this is a sporting match, but actually norm defying dangerous decisions when it came to the 2020 election, and then made statements about going into 2022, I know a decent number of these

people. I've interviewed some of them. They know their civics, right? Oftentimes, they went to top tier law schools, clerked on all the right courts, wrote for the right journals.

So the question for you then, especially speaking from the CFR perspective, kind of like the embodiment of the quote unquote, establishment, what does the reality that if we're looking at the individual decision making level, it doesn't seem to come down to a lack of knowledge of the themes we're discussing today. What's your reflection on that? You're 100% right. And the founders were worried about that. You can't mandate or legislate character or what they called virtue.

You know, we always like to say we're a country of laws, not men or men and women.

That's not really true. At the end of the day, we are a country of men and women. And if they fail to demonstrate character, we're in trouble because the law can't protect you from everything.

There's a lot of political behavior of real consequence that's not illegal, but it's counter productive or wrong by any definition of the word, which is again why I wrote this book.

This is not a book about what's legal. This is a book about what's right and necessary, about what's wrong and needs to be avoided. That's what obligations are about. They're the things you should do, you ought to do, or the things you are not to do, not that you have to do.

So there are, yeah, these people know sitting, but they violate what I would say is the most fundamental of the obligations, which is to put country first. I made that the 10th and final obligation because I believe it's the ultimate one. And what they are unwilling to do is put country first. They're much more interested in putting their own personal ambitions first or their party's agenda first. And again, it's just what the founders warned against, that you would have factions that would do that. And that's a worrisome thing, because you cannot legislate character. And so at the end of the day, where I come out as we can try to teach character, encourage character, that's what religious authorities can do, teachers can do, parents can do and the rest. But ultimately, it's going to be the American voter who is either going to penalize people for showing a lack of character, or hopefully reward people for showing real character, the profiles and courage, so to speak. So that's on us. But I don't disagree with where you began a few minutes ago. There's people who know better, who should behave better and have failed to. And it's not a lack of knowledge. It's not a lack of exposure to civics. Exposure to civics is not a guarantee. I think it's useful, but it's not a guarantee.

You know, I just interviewed Kevin Roberts, the head of the Heritage Foundation, and he began his conversation on the state of conservatism by saying conservatives need to ask what time it is. And that needs to serve as the foundational starting point. So when you bring up the question of country first, I really wonder about without just agreeing with that obligation, I wonder if the big issue we have today is that it's pretty straightforward for and let's just be frank, for people on the right to argue that you're right, Richard, we do need to put country first. The left is trying to destroy this country. And that's why we're doing this, this, this and that. And I know that that seems like it doesn't seem like it is a rationalization. It is, it is

obviously self-interested. But I'm just curious how you respond to that, to that point. It came up the other night, what you raised. We were doing an event here at the council, Congressman Jim Himes stood up. And he said, I have a question for you. He said, put country first, exactly what you've just raised. And he said, I bet if you asked a lot of the people who stormed the Capitol on January 6th, they would say, we were putting country first. We were patriots. And we are, as you suggested, in their own minds, they were saving the United States from socialism or whatever it is that they imagined they were saving the United States from, without from a stolen election. So all I can do in that case is fall back on Ronald Reagan. It may have been a very well addressed. I can't remember. I think it was. Said, we don't just want patriotism in this country. That is not enough. Indeed, it could be dangerous. We need informed patriotism, critical word being informed. And the problem with one of the problems with the people on January 6th or the sort of individual you just described is it's not informed. It's both, I believe, to some extent wrong about what they see as this threat, but more important, it's wrong about how you respond to things you disagree with. We have got to learn in this country about what is the American way to promote a political agenda. It is not by using violence. That is un-American. It is not by ignoring facts and claiming that elections will rig when there's 60 investigations that demonstrate they were or not. It's not by refusing to concede an election that was clearly lost or pressuring political officials to, quote, unquote, find 11,000 votes. That is not part of our political tradition. That is outside of our political tradition. That's where informed patriotism becomes critical. And that's my response to that, that it's incumbent on individuals to pursue their political aim. The aims need to be consistent with the fabric of American democracy. And the means need to be consistent with it. I think my response that I'd love for you to speak on is to also, it'd be great if we, and once again, I keep saying, we, and find all these ways, I think, a key theme is that this isn't just something anyone, body or person can dictate. But if we could find a way to just de-escalate people's perception of the stakes, because once again, you're coming from Northern Ireland, you're studying Iraq to countries, soft like locations where people are literally across decades murdering each other in horrific acts of violence. Can you just kind of speak about the differences between, and I don't want to just like, otherwise or talk about foreign things as if they're different, but it just keeps so, because I mostly have, I mostly have a foreign policy background. So it's just so hard for me to read about Ireland and Iraq and think that you could compare anything in America in either direction to the stakes being that high. If it's Iraq and it's 2006, to be honest, if you're a Sunni Muslim or you're a Shiite Muslim, I understand storming Baghdad, there are interior ministry officers going around killing your countrymen. But that isn't the situation here. So how do we maybe find a way of articulating the stakes just are not that high? Well, it's not the way it is here, but there are some warning signs. One is we're more armed than either of those societies by a long shot, we're much more armed than Northern Ireland ever was. And I would expect arms per capita are higher here than they were or in Iraq. Second, while Iraq has a warning in another way, without overdoing any comparison, since the situations are qualitatively different, which is it shows that the danger of all or nothing politics. One of the many reasons compromises or can be a good thing is not only do they tend to allow you to get things done and you get buy-in, but you avoid situations where people believe that politics

have in no way look out for their interests. If every issue becomes all or nothing and you get nothing, well, what state do you have in the political process? Why should you play by the rules if you feel that there's nothing in it for you? I think it increases dramatically a propensity for violence. You feel you have nothing to gain by working within the system, but rather everything to lose. So again, compromise becomes important. It's one of the reasons I made an obligation. I'm not saying the United States is there. I'm simply saying we shouldn't think that we are so different that it can't happen here. We shouldn't assume that American democracy, just because it's two and a half centuries old, is immune from the historical pattern where democracies often face their greatest threats, not from invasion. So that stills the risk, as Ukraine demonstrates, but democracies often decay and deteriorate from within. There's a whole literature about this, about how democracies over time get sclerotic. They can't adapt as well as they could. You get special interests that dominate any collective interest. And in this country, many other things have entered into it. We've grown from an era of broadcasting to narrow casting. We've changed the way we fund our politics. So parties, which used to be mediating institutions have grown much, much weaker. We have lots of grievance in our society, a lot of it culturally and economically linked. And as a result, populism, which becomes anti-institutional, is much stronger. You just mentioned this gentleman from the Heritage Institution. The problem is modern Republicans are not conservatives. Conservatives, I don't know how many people there continue to read Edmund Burke, but I don't see a lot of Berkyan conservatism running around the Republican Party. What I see is radicalism and populism. Suddenly, a large state in the economy, a much more intrusive state in what used to be a zone of privacy, much more questioning in some cases of a strong national security establishment. So I elect to respect the times for precedent we see not on the court. So modern Republicanism is in some ways anti-conservative. By the way, it explains why I left the Republican Party two and a half years ago. I'm still a conservative. And to paraphrase Reagan, I feel I didn't leave the party. The party left me. I would love for the Republican Party to again become a conservative party, small say. I think there's quite a ways it has to travel in order to get there. I'm not sure it's done with its thermodynamic phase of populist radicalism. I think the 2024 elections are going to be interesting or revealing whether there is anyone on the conservative side who runs as a quote unquote traditional conservative Republican, maybe the former governor of Maryland, Mr. Hogan, I don't know, maybe somebody else. But most of the would-bees are clearly not in that zone, at least in what they're, I don't know what they're thinking, but in terms of what they're saying. So we'll say. You know, something I'm always curious about when I'm speaking with someone such as yourself is just what is your reaction to the fact that the world seems to have appreciably changed over the past 20, 30, 40 years? I mean, for example, at a baseline level, right, like you could argue that I don't want to say that CFR is like a gatekeeping institution in a pejorative way. But, you know, it's an institution where credentials matter, where there's a system, there are rules. And I think one could just empirically claim that just isn't as true as it as it used to be. So just what's your reflection on how much of that is a social construction? Like how much does need just sort of I'm like

independent YouTuber, so obviously my incentive is to say, we're all the same now, everything is just hunky dory and you can't claim, you know, more of an I claim, I'm incentivized to say that. But how much do you think that that is true from your experience at leading the institution? It's an interesting question. Sure, things have changed. I think there's a it's harder in this flood of information that comes at us. I think it's harder to discern facts and truth and to so many people that are in their own information, ecosystems or bubbles, that there's less commonality. So it's harder to have debates kind of going back to the Moynihan quote, everyone's entitled to his or her own opinions, not their own facts. Well, everyone increasingly has their own quote unquote facts, even when they're not. So I think it's it's it's gotten more difficult. I think there's also less of a consensus around some of what let's all get a bit controversial around what I thought were some of the founding ideas of this country about equality and equal opportunity. And a lot of people are much more concerned about outcomes rather than processes. And that's particularly on the left, I think there's I was just critical of the right for going from conservative to populist radical, I think on the left, people have gone in many ways from what I would call classic liberalism to much more concerned with identity and outcomes. So yeah, I think the the political office, what metaphor I'd use, but yeah, the contours of the conversation in this country have changed. And there's less of a consensus in both parties and even beyond the parties, there's just less of a consensus about our society. So I see it in the political space and I see it in the economic space and the economic space, these debates about what ought to be the social floor. You referred to quote unquote socialism before, but things like you know, guaranteed incomes and the rest, I think there's interesting debates out there about what every citizen is owed as a minimum, and then how to arrive at it. So there's fundamental debates now about the safety net and about the relationship of the individual to the economy and politically big debates as I suggested about role of government about opportunities versus rights and about outcomes versus opportunities and so forth. So I think there's less in both parties and across the political spectrum, there's less givens or less consensus. And that could either be a very rich creative time, or it could be a time of real political and social breakdown. And we'll see how it plays out, but I don't disagree with your point. And I find that over the last couple of decades, it's interesting to think why, whether the narrow casting evolutions have had a role in that, some of the problems we've had with public education have had a role on it, the end of the Cold War, you know, what have you. But more is up for grabs politically and intellectually, there's fewer widely shared givens or assumptions in American politics. I'm glad that you took it to socialism because I could put on my socialist hat here for the portion of the audience that sits from that perspective. I think what they would say to you is, okay, you're talking about our obligations as citizens, we're doing an updated version of the, you know, JFK asked not where your country can do for you, quotation. But in many ways, you could say that all these obligations are in favor of a status quo that especially like younger people, it doesn't exactly work for them. So hearing kind of that attempt at articulating the perspective, what would you say a government's obligations are to its actual citizens. So for, I think a good example would be student debt, right, like back in the 60s, it was cheaper to go to college or society was less credentialist,

etc, etc, etc. To what degree does the government have an obligation, maybe via socialism, very invite maybe via social democracy, to provide that standard that used to exist. The first thing I say is that's not what this book is about. I basically say in the book, there's that debate about what every citizen is owed, which is what I was just alluding to. And there's a big literature about that. I wasn't writing about that. I have my own personal views. And all that, we could have that conversation. But there's an enormous set of debates on that big literature. I don't have any particular standing in that debate about the question of everything from entitlements to guaranteed incomes to loan forgiveness and all that. I have my own views on all of those things, but I don't think mine are particularly more weighty than yours or anybody else's. No, I'm talking about obligations of individual citizens to one another and to the government. I think too much of our conversation in this country isn't the other way around. It's about rights and what the government owes us. It's almost like it's out of proportion. That is way too much of our conversation politically and economically. What we are owed. Well, how about what we owe? And by the way, not simply as a moral and normative point, but unless we start thinking about that, we're all going to pay a price for it. So that's why I wrote this book. I mean, again, I'm happy to have those conversations. But I think the real challenge to American democracy is to figure out what we owe one another and the country. And by the way, what I'm arguing for in the book is a set of attitudes and behaviors that would allow us to have that conversation you just raised about what the government quote, unquote, owes us as citizens to have it in a more productive way. Can we have it in a more civil way? Can we potentially broker compromise? Can we avoid violence in the course of that? I'm trying to set up a context in which we can debate those issues. Those are policy issues. And happy to have those debates. But right now, my fear is we will not have productive or constructive debates given that our political culture is where it is. Hence my attempt to address America's political culture. No, I think that's true. I think that's a really helpful correction because the point here then to interpret what you're saying is that there's a foundation upon which everything in American politics and society operates and that foundation is premised or built up on mixing too many metaphors here. These obligations to one another. So in the last 10 minutes or so, I just want to get to more of the foreign policy side of things because that's your area of expertise. I know that's what a lot of folks in the audience are curious about. I think folks who are listening should not only read the book, but they should also read your Foreign Affairs piece from the fall 2022 issue, which is about just a dangerous decade. Can you just close with your, because I said it's probably the second category thing that keeps you up at night. I'd love for you to just close with the other thing that you're thinking about then. Actually, there's a connection between the two. The article you referenced in Foreign Affairs, the dangerous decade, I point to three things. The first is the revival of a great power geopolitics, great power rivalry, cross-border conflict, and so forth. And all these people who were thinking that was a relic of the past and had disappeared with the end of the Cold War were just simply dead wrong. And a lot of the policies that were instituted in the aftermath failed, whether dealing with Russia, dealing with China, and so forth. So what we're seeing is a kind of return of history, a revival of the stuff of history with unstilts, because there's far more capabilities and far more hands. So just geopolitically, the major powers,

the medium powers, what we're seeing in Ukraine, what we could see in the Asia-Pacific. There's a lot going on there, and we can talk about it if you want. Secondly, as if that were not enough, what's unique, I think, about this modern era is the emergence and importance of the set of global challenges. We just largely got through this infectious disease challenge, but it won't be the last. And climate change is a heavy reality. Terrorism is still with us, but these are all global challenges. And I'd say what every one of these has in common is there's a gap between the severity of the challenge and the adequacy of the response. And in some cases, those gaps are not just large, but they're growing. So you've got your geopolitical rivalry increase, you've got this global reality, which we can't insulate ourselves from. And then thirdly, you get back to the subject of the book. You've got both of these external realities taking place at a time when the United States, which has been the principal actor in the world now for 75 years, we have been the principal provider of order in the world for 75 years on before anyone jumps down my throat. And I'm not saying we always got it right, we didn't, but we got it right more often than not. And our intervention of World War Two was pivotal. The basis of our Cold War policy was obviously successful. Cold War State was peaceful. And then it ended on terms that were very sympathetic to our interest in values. And since we've had primacy, though we haven't always, I think, indeed over the last 30 years, I think it's been a very disappointing era of American foreign policy. That's another conversation. But my point is simply that our ability to play a large and successful global role has been put into question because of everything we've been talking about for the last 45 minutes. If we're much more divided at home, we will not have the bandwidth, the focus, the unity to play an effective role in the world. No one's going to want to emulate our democracy. Our allies are going to be uneasy about depending on us. Our foes are going to see opportunity in our divisions. So it's this then combination of our internal disarray, to use one of my favorite words, matched against these growing external challenges, which taken collectively

is what makes me so uneasy. And I've never been more worried given, again, this confluence or combination of factors. So three or four last quick questions. So number one, given that dangerous decade framing, what would you say, especially to younger millennial and Gen Z listeners, what would you say America's principal foreign policy objective should be? Is it preserving primacy? Is it preserving a world order, which is technically kind of different than purely preserving primacy? But what's the objective or what's the what's the northern the north star we should be looking towards? Let me answer it with two things. One is the principal purpose of American

foreign policy should be to influence the foreign policies of others. It should not be to transform them. It should be to shape their foreign policies. It should not be to preserve American primacy. That will either happen or not based upon both trajectories of other economies and countries and our own trajectory. So we will either have privacy or not, depending upon how we perform in absolute terms and how we perform relative to others. No, the purpose of American foreign policy,

I would again say, is to influence the foreign policies of others. And yes, to bring about a world that's based upon certain norms or rules. Among them is the territory ought not to be acquired through the use of military force. We do not want a world where that becomes common place, which is why I believe we're correct to be working to resist Russian aggression.

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Why we should be taking steps to shade Chinese calculations in a way that will deter China from ever thinking that aggression against Taiwan would be a wise move. And then I would say, secondly, we ought to be thinking in foreign policy, which is different from geopolitical type things I just said, is to narrow that gap between global challenges and global responses. So if you think about foreign policy, we need to build two orders. We need to build the order of geopolitical order, and that's where allies come in and so forth. And then second of all, we ought to be building this order to deal with global challenges. I think that's the 21st century challenge of American foreign policy. I'd say last two questions. First would be, we're nearing the 20th anniversary of the war in Iraq. You were opposed to the war in Iraq, but you were in the Bush administration at the, you know, during the lead up to the war. How do you kind of explain that period to younger listeners who much of their stuff, like, you know, once again, like I'm pretty aligned with you on foreign policy, whenever there's audience pushback, it basically says everything Richard just said was great, but the Iraq war, which is I think a pretty substantive and I think important response. So what's your quick reflection there? Like I wrote one of my earlier books, I don't know how many books ago, it was called War of Necessity, War of Choice. And the War of Necessity referred to the Gulf War when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990. And I believe the United States was right in marshaling an international response to that, that ultimately ejected Saddam Hussein and Iraqi forces from Kuwait. And the War of Choice, which was the 2003 Iraq war that I think you're right, we're going to mark the 20th anniversary shortly, I believe was seriously flawed. I believe it was flawed in the undertaking as in both in the doing as well as in the implementation. I believe we should not have done it. It was a massive case of overreach. I do not believe it was warranted. It was extremely unfortunate. The human cost, the military cost, the economic cost, the cost to our standing in the world, the strengthened Iran's position of primacy in parts of the region. And it had this effect that you alluded to. It alienated a large chunk of Americans from their government and from American foreign policy. So I think historians will be properly critical and then some about that undertaking. So 20 years have not changed my perspective on that. So the closing question kind of begins where we started. The first book of your words that I read, I saw War of Necessity, War of Choice on the bookshelf. I did not pick that up back in 2010, but I read for policy. It's the closest I've come to writing a memoir. So in some ways, it's out of all my books, like Children. And in this most recent book, I feel good about something. I want to start this national conversation about American democracy and civics and national service and all that. But the most personal book I've ever written was War of Necessity, War of Choice. It's the closest I've ever had to a memoir. So definitely still worth reading then. So then the close is basically just that your 2014 book, I believe, Foreign Policy Begins at Home is the first book of yours that I read. And hopefully this is a sign that you're able to intuit the mood of the country. In terms of maybe this book is presaging the mood of the country there, obviously you see from two different directions, like the Biden administrations, like by American, the foreign policy for the middle class project coming more out of the center left than obviously

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like Trumpism, you know, make America great. And I know that's not exactly what you're arguing. There was a funny Twitter conversation where Sara Bimari tweeted out your book. He said, I gave a terrible review and you were basically like, that wasn't quite what I was.

People should look it up. It's very funny. He was both giving a magical but you're like, that wasn't quite what I meant. No. That was pretty funny though.

So just close there. You know, how is that aged? How do you interpret the various ends of the political spectrum, intuiting what you are getting at?

Let me answer slightly different. And if you're not happy, you can have at me again, which is the reaction to this book has been very interesting.

It's been out, you know, not long now, less than two weeks. It's doing very well and made the best seller list already, which is nice. It's always gratifying as an author to get on the New York Times list. So I'm not going to overtake spare. I'm sorry to say, I think Prince Harry has me safely. It's a drug or not. It's a drug or not. But I'm just behind Bono. So I'm only one behind Bono. So there's hope. But it's resonating. There's something of people in this country know there's something wrong. People in this country know we're going off the rails. They're worried about everything we've been talking about for the last hour. And they know education is not adequate. They know that the media landscape is toxic. They worry about a lack of common experience now in America. There's tremendous support for national service, tremendous support for civics in classrooms, a lot of support for things like civility. People wish to think people in Washington would get more done. So I'm intrigued. I actually think that I'm tapping into something.

So what makes me, I'm not the most optimistic person, as you've already figured out.

But I actually think there's a chance that we are entering into what could be a reformist period in the United States. Because we've seen from January 6th, the political dysfunction, to you name it, to all the violence in this society, people know something is seriously amiss in this society. And I am encountering a willingness to recognize that, and that at least provides a potential basis for doing something about it. So I'm intrigued about this moment.

I think that's an excellent place to leave it. Thank you so much for joining me on the Realignment. A lot of great book recommendations there, and I hope folks check them out. Thanks for having me. 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

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