

The following is a conversation with Jeremy Surrey, a historian at UT Austin.  
And now a quick few second mention of each sponsor.

Check them out in the description.

It's the best way to support this podcast.

We've got eight sleep for naps, better help for mental health, inside tracker for bio monitoring and athletic greens for multi vitamins.

Choose wise than my friends.

And now onto the full ad reads.

As always, no ads in the middle.

I try to make this interesting, but if you must skip them, friends, please still check out the sponsors.

I enjoy their stuff.

Maybe you will too.

This episode is sponsored by eight sleep and it's new pod three mattress.

I saw a meme recently.

Maybe I should look it up.

It was a meme that was highlighting different ways you can do self care, which is, you know, depending on how you feel, what's the best solution.

I think it was, if everybody hates you, go to sleep.

If you hate everybody, uh, eat some food.

And if you hate yourself, take a shower.

I think those, uh, advice, obviously it's just a meme, but there's some truth to that, at least the first and the third for me.

A shower is a refreshing way to take sort of control of your life.

And it feels like a fresh start and sleep.

It is just magic to me.

And not even a full night's sleep, but a little bit of sleep, like a nap, can completely transform my worldview.

Just having a bit of a melancholy outlook or maybe being a little bit cynical about the world.

For me, I take a nap and everything feels new.

It's just, I could see the beauty in the world again.

And, you know, some of that is a, of course, a gift.

It's, it's built on a foundation of, you know, regular exercise, a good diet.

And some of that is genetics and biochemistry in the brain, but really sleep for everybody.

It can give a positive delta to your mood.

So I take sort of the bed I sleep on extremely seriously.

Some of that is temperature control.

I think for me, temperature is so essential to a great sleeping experience.

And, uh, a sleep does a good job of that.

They control the temperature, obviously in a technological way.

So you could do it with an app.

It's a wonderful thing.

Check it out and get special savings when you go to [eightsleep.com slash lex](https://eightsleep.com/slash/lex). This episode is also brought to you by BetterHelp, spelled H-E-L-P help. I actually have a conversation with an amazing scientist and a psychiatrist coming up and it's going to be a very wide ranging conversation. I think about different aspects of human behavior, the good, the bad, and the ugly. So I think, uh, much of his specialization is in a trauma, but he really knows so much about narcissism, sociopathy, psychopathy, just the nature of evil, uh, nature of hate, all of those things. And the human mind is just really fascinating. And I do think that talk therapy is a really, really good way to explore some of the darker corners of that mind, of that human mind. I've been a big fan of that from a historical perspective, uh, Freud and Young. I just psychoanalysis had been really interesting to me. Obviously, as a big fan of podcasts, I see a huge value in the power of conversation to achieve a kind of intellectual, spiritual, emotional intimacy, uh, in the, in the realm of ideas. Sometimes it feels one way, but you know, as a fan of a lot of podcasts, it doesn't feel one way. It feels like a real conversation, uh, even though I know it's not. Uh, even though I know I'm just a listener. Anyway, I'm a big believer in talk therapy and better help allows you to do that really easily. So the barrier to access is a nil, you know, it's, it's super easy. And that's essential. The first step, the first step is really the hardest truly is. So you can check them out at [betterhelp.com slash lux](https://betterhelp.com/slash/lex) and save on your first month. This show is also brought to you by inside tracker, a service I use to track biological data. So I love tracking stuff about my life. Now I do, uh, want to be extremely careful not to over optimize everything. I think, uh, in some way optimization is the death of romance because I think romance or just the appreciation of the beauty of the human experience is in part grounded in, uh, the chaos, the unpredictability, the uncertainty, the mystery, all of that. Right. And I think getting perfect data and coming up with a perfect plan and optimizing every single little thing is, I think suffocates the possibility of magic that is the human condition. That said, you do, I believe have to build a foundation of health, health broadly defined. And so for that, you have to collect as much data from your own body as possible and take actions based on that data. That's what inside tracker helps you with. You can get special savings for limited time and you go to [inside tracker.com slash Lex](https://inside-tracker.com/slash/lex). This show is brought to you by athletic greens and it's a G1 drink. This, uh, set of ad reads I'm doing today is just the all stars of what brings joy and happiness and health to my life. Sleep, mental health, collecting good long-term data about your body. And now with athletic greens, I mean, that's really my favorite source of happiness in the health space in my personal life.

I drink, uh, the age you want to drink twice a day.  
I break my fast with it.  
I do it after a long run, put it in the fridge, get a little bit cold.  
While I take a quick shower, jump out, drink the drink.  
I feel refreshed and ready to continue the day.  
Now that all the dark, deep exploration of my own mind, the process of running, whether I'm listening to audio books and brown noise, all of that is done.  
And now that's kind of the trigger that says I'm going to start a new and I'm going to take on the rest of the day.  
That's what age you want symbolizes for me.  
Anyway, they'll give you one month supply of fish oil when you sign up at athleticgreens.com slash Lex.  
This is the Lex Friedman podcast to support it.  
Please check out our sponsors in the description.  
And now dear friends, here's Jeremy.  
Sorry.  
What is the main idea, the, the main case that you make in your new book, Civil War by Other Means?  
America's long and unfinished fight for democracy.  
So our democratic institutions in the United States, they are filled with many virtues and many elements in their design that improve our society and allow for innovation.  
But they also have many flaws in them as any institutions created by human beings have.  
And the flaws in our institutions go back to a number of judgments and perspectives that people in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries had.  
And those flaws have been built into our institutions and they continue to hinder innovation and growth in our society.  
Three of the flaws that I emphasize in this book are flaws of exclusion.  
The ways our institutions exclude people, not just African Americans, many different groups.  
The ways our institutions also give power to certain people who have position rather than skill or intelligence or quality.  
And third and most of all, the ways our institutions embed certain myths in our society, myths that prevent us from gaining the knowledge we need to improve our world.  
In all of these ways, our democracy is hindered by the false reverence for institutions that actually need to be reformed, just as we need to highlight the good elements of them.  
That's really what my book is about.  
And then the myth, the, the, the false reverence, what are we talking about there?  
So there's a way in which we believe that if we love our country, it's somehow wrong to criticize our institutions.  
I believe if you love your country, you want to encourage your institutions to get better and better.  
I love my university where I work, but I want it to be better.  
We have many flaws.  
I love my family, but I'm constantly telling family members how they can be better.  
That's what true knowledge leadership is about, not just cheerleading.

What's the counterpoint to that?

Because the other extreme is a deep, all-encompassing cynicism towards institutions. So for me, I like the idea of loving America, which seems to be sometimes a politicized statement these days, that you believe in the ideals of this country.

That seems to be, that seems to be either a naive or a political statement the way it's interpreted.

So the flip side of that, having a healthy skepticism on institutions is good, but having a complete paralyzing cynicism seems to be bad.

Absolutely.

Both are ahistorical positions.

What I try to do as a historian is work in between those spaces.

The virtue is in the middle ground, for better or for worse.

And what we have to recognize is that our institutions are necessary.

There's a reason government exists.

There's a reason our union was created.

That's what Abraham Lincoln was heroically fighting for.

So we have to believe in our union.

We have to believe in our government.

And we, as business people, as intellectuals, we have to be part of the solution, not the problem.

But that doesn't mean just ignoring the deep flaws in our institutions, even if we find personally ways to get around them.

What really worries me is that there are a lot of very intelligent, well-intentioned people in our society who have figured out how to live with the flaws in our institutions, rather than how to use their skills to correct the flaws in our institutions.

There's folks, like somebody who lives next door, to me, Mike Amalus is an anarchist.

Philosophically, maybe more than practically, just sort of argues for that position.

It's an interesting thought experiment, I would say.

And so if you have these flaws as institutions, one thing to do, as the communists did at the beginning of the 20th century, is to burn the thing down and start anew.

And the other is to fix from within.

One slow step at a time.

What's the case for both, from a history perspective?

Sure.

So historically, there has always been an urge to burn down the institutions and start again, start with a blank slate.

The historical record is that almost never works, because what happens when you destroy the institutions, you gave the example of the Bolshevik Revolution.

When you destroy the institutions, all you do is in the jungle that's left behind, you give advantages to those who are the most powerful.

Institutions always place certain limits upon the most powerful in the jungle.

If you go back to the jungle, the most powerful are actually going to have the most influence and most control.

So the revolutionaries who are usually the vulnerable turn out to then be the victims

of the revolution.

And this is exactly what we saw with the French Revolution, with the Russian Revolution. So the record for that is not a great record.

There still might be times to do that, but I think we should be very cautious about that. The record for working through institutions is a much better record.

Now, what we have to be careful about is as we're working through institutions, not to become bought into them, not to become of those institutions.

So what I've written about in this book and in other books, my book on Henry Kissinger, for example, is how it's important when in an institution to still bring an outsider perspective.

I believe in being an inside outsider.

And I think most of your listeners are inside outsiders.

They're people who care about what's going on inside, but they're bringing some new ideas from the outside.

I think the correct statement to say is most of the listeners are inside.

The correct statement to say is most of the listeners, most people aspire to be inside or outsiders.

But we human nature is such that we easily become insider insiders.

So like we like that idea, but the reality is, and I've been very fortunate because of this podcast to talk to certain folks that live in certain bubbles.

And it's very hard to know when you're in a bubble that you should get out of the bubble of thought.

And that's a really tricky thing because like, yeah, when you're, whether it's politics, whether it's science, whether it's any pursuits in life, because everybody around you, all your friends, you have like a little rat race and you're competing with each other.

And then you get promotion, you get excited and you can see how you can get more and more power.

And it's not, it's not like a dark cynical rat race.

It's fun.

That's the process of life.

And then you forget that there, you just collectively have created a set of rules for the game that you're playing.

You forget that this game doesn't have to have these rules.

You can break them.

This happens in like, in Wall Street, like the financial, the financial system, everybody starts to like collectively agree on a set of rules that they play and they don't realize like, we don't have to be playing this game.

It's tough.

It's really tough.

It takes a special kind of human being as opposed to being an anti-establishment on everything, which also gets a lot of attention.

But being just enough anti-establishment to figure out ideas how to improve the establishment.

That's such a tricky place to operate.

I agree.

I like the word iconoclastic.

I think it's important to be an iconoclast, which is to say, you love ideas.

You're serious about ideas, but you're never comfortable with consensus.

And I write about that in this book.

I've written about that actually a lot in the New York Times too.

I think consensus is overstated.

As someone who's half Jewish and half Hindu, I don't want to live in a society where everyone agrees because my guess is they're going to come after people like me.

I want to live in a society that's pluralistic.

This is what Abraham Lincoln was really fighting for in the Civil War.

This is what the Civil War is really about, what my book's about, which is that we need a society where institutions encourage, as you say, different modes of thought and respect different modes of thought and work through disagreement.

So a society should not be a society where everyone agrees.

A democratic society should be a society where people disagree but can still work together.

That's the Lincoln vision.

And how do you get there?

I think you get there by having a historical perspective, always knowing that no matter what moment you're in and no matter what room you're in with really smart people, there are always things they're missing.

We know that as historians.

No one is clairvoyant and the iconoclast is looking for the things that have been forgotten, the silences in the room.

And also, I wonder what kind of skill, what kind of process is required for the iconoclast to reveal what is missing to the rest of the room?

Because it's not just shouting with a megaphone that something is missing because nobody will listen to you.

You have to convince them.

Right.

It's honestly where I have trouble myself because I often find myself in that iconoclastic role and people don't like to hear it.

I like to believe that people are acting out of good will, which I think they usually are, and that people are open to new ideas.

But you find very quickly, even those who you think are open-minded, once they've committed themselves and put their money and their reputation on the line, they don't want to hear otherwise.

So in a sense, what you say is the bigger than even being an iconoclast, it's being able to persuade and work with people who are afraid of your ideas.

Yeah.

I think the key in conversations is to get people out of a defensive position, make them realize we're on the same side, we're brothers and sisters, and from that place,

I think you just raise the question.

It's a little thought that just lands.

And then I've noticed this time and time again, just a little subtle thing.

And then months later, it percolates, somewhere in the mind, it's like, all right, that little

doubt because I also realized in these battles, especially political battles, people often don't have folks on their side that they can really trust as a fellow human being to challenge them.

It's a difficult role to be in because in these battles, you kind of have a tribe and you have a set of ideas and there's another tribe and you have a set of ideas.

And when somebody says something counter to your viewpoint, you almost always want to put them in the other tribe as opposed to having truly listening to another person.

That takes skill.

But ultimately, I think that's the way to bridge these divides is having these kinds of conversations.

That's why I'm actually, again, optimistically believe in the power of social media to do that if you design it well.

But currently, the battle rages on on Twitter.

Well, I think what you're getting at, which is so important is storytelling.

And all the great leaders that I've studied, some of whom are in this book, some of whom are not, right?

Whether they're politicians, social activists, technologists, it's the story that gets people in.

People don't respond to an argument.

We're trained, at least in the United States, we're often trained to argue, you're told in a class, okay, this part of the room, take this position, this part of the room, take this position.

And that's helpful because it forces you to see different sides of the argument.

But in fact, those on one side never convinced those on the other side through argument.

It's through a story that people can identify with.

It's when you bring your argument to life in human terms.

And someone again, like Abraham Lincoln, was a master at that.

He told stories.

He found ways to disarm people and to move them without their even realizing they were being moved.

Yeah, not make it a debate, make it tell a story.

That's fascinating.

Because yes, some of the most convincing politicians, I don't feel like they're arguing a point.

They're just telling a story.

And it gets in there, right?

That's right.

When you look at what Zelensky has done in Ukraine in response to the Russian invasion, and I know you were there on the front lines yourself, it's not that he's arguing a position that persuaded us.

We already believed what we believed about Russia, but he's bringing the story of Ukrainian suffering to life and making us see the behavior of the Russians that is moving opinion around the world.

Well, the interesting stuff, sometimes it's not actually the story told by the person,

but the story told about the person.

And some of that could be propaganda, some of that could be legitimate stories, which is the fascinating thing.

The power of story is the very power that's leveraged by propaganda to convince the populace.

But the idea, one of the most powerful ideas when I traveled in Ukraine, and in general, to me personally, the idea that President Zelensky stayed in Kiev in the early days of war on everybody, from his inner circle to the United States, everybody in the Western NATO, everybody was telling him, and even on the Russian side, I assumed they thought he would leave, he would escape, and he didn't.

From foolishness or from heroism, I don't know.

But if that's a story that I think united the country, and it's such a small thing, but it's powerful.

It's the most basic of all human stories, the story of human courage.

And I remember watching his social media feed on that, and he was standing outside, not even in a bunker, standing outside in Kiev, as the Russian forces are attacking and saying, I'm here, and this minister is here, and this minister is here.

We're not corrupt.

We're not stooges of the Americans who told us to leave.

We're staying because we care about Ukraine.

And the story of courage, I mean, that's the story that babies grow up seeing their parents as courageous.

It's the most natural of all stories.

And that's also the stories for better awards that are told throughout history.

Because stories of courage and stories of evil, the two extremes, are the ones that are kind of, it's a nice mechanism to tell the stories of wars, of conflicts, of struggles, all of it.

The tension between those two.

And the reason I believe studying history and writing about history is so essential, is because it gives us more stories.

The problem with much of our world, I think, is that we're confronted by data.

We're confronted by information.

And of course, it's valuable.

But it's easy to manipulate or misuse information.

It's the stories that give us a structure.

It's the stories where we find morality.

It's the stories where we find political value.

And what do you get from studying history?

You learn more stories about more people.

Yeah, I'm a sucker for courage, for stories of courage.

Like I've been in too many rooms.

I've often seen too many people sort of in subtle ways sacrifice their integrity and did nothing.

And people that step up when the opinion is unpopular and they do something where they really put themselves on the line, whether it's their money or their well-being, I don't



know.

That gives me hope about humanity.

And of course, during the war, like Ukraine, you see that more and more.

Now other people have a very cynical perspective of it that's saying, well, those are just narratives that are constructed for propaganda purposes and so on.

But I've seen it with my own eyes.

There's heroes out there, both small and big.

So just regular citizens and leaders.

One set of heroes I learned about writing this book that I didn't know about that I should have are more than 100,000 former slaves who become Union soldiers during the Civil War.

It's an extraordinary story.

One of it as North versus South, White Northern troops versus White Southern troops.

There are, as I said, more than 100,000 slaves.

No education, never anything other than slaves who flee their plantations, join the Union Army.

And what I found in the research and other historians have written about this too is they become some of the most courageous soldiers because they know what they're fighting for. But there's something more to it than that.

It seems in their stories that there is a humanity, a human desire for freedom and a human desire to improve oneself, even for those who have been denied even the most basic rights for all of their lives.

And I think that story should be inspiring to all of us as a story of courage because we all deal with difficulties.

But none of us are starting from slavery.

That's really powerful that that flame, the longing for freedom can't be extinguished through the generations of slavery.

So that's something you talk about.

There's some deep sense in which while the war was in part about slavery, the slaves themselves fought for their freedom and they won their freedom.

I don't think it's a war about slavery.

I think it's a war about freedom because if you say it's a war about slavery, then it sounds like it's an argument between the slave masters and the other White guys who didn't want slavery to exist.

And of course, that argument did exist, but it wasn't.

It was a war over freedom, especially after 1863 into the second year of the war when Lincoln, because of war pressures, signs the Emancipation Proclamation, which therefore says that the contraband, the property of Southerners, i.e. their slaves, will now be freed and brought into the Union army.

That makes it about freedom, already the slaves were leaving the plantations.

They knew what was going on and they were going to get out of slavery as soon as they could.

But now it becomes a war over-freeing them, over-opening that opportunity for them.

And that's how the war ends.

That's really important, right?

And that's where we are in our politics today.

It's the same debate.

It's why I wrote this book.

The challenge of our time is to understand how do we make our society open to more freedom for more people.

So let's go to the beginning.

How did the American Civil War start and why?

So the American Civil War starts because of our flawed institutions.

The founders had mixed views of slavery, but they wanted a system that would eventually work its way toward opening for more people of more kinds, not necessarily equality, but they wanted a more open democratic system.

But our institutions were designed in ways that gave disproportionate power to slave holders in particular states in the Union, through the Senate, through the Electoral College, through many of the institutions we talk about in our politics today.

Therefore, that part of the country was, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, holding the rest of the country hostage.

For a poor white man like Abraham Lincoln born in Kentucky who makes his way in Illinois, slavery was an evil, not just for moral reasons.

It was an evil because it denied him democratic opportunity.

Why would anyone hire poor Abe to do something if they could get a slave to do it for free?

An economy of opportunity for him had to be an economy that was open and that did not have slavery, particularly in the new states that were coming into the Union.

Lincoln was one of the creators of the Republican Party, which was a party dedicated to making sure all new territory was open to anyone who was willing to work, any male figure who would be paid for their work, free labor, free soil, free men, basic capitalism.

Southerners, southern plantation owners were an aristocracy that did not want that.

They wanted to use slavery and expand slavery into the new territories.

What caused the Civil War, the clash, and our institutions that were unable to adapt and continue to give disproportionate power to these southern plantation slave owners.

The Supreme Court was dominated by them.

It was dominated by them and so the Republican Party came into power as a critique of that and Southerners unwilling to accept, Southern Confederates unwilling to accept that change went to war with the Union.

So who was on each side, the Union Confederates?

What are we talking about?

What are the states, how many people, what's like the demographics and the dynamics of each side?

The Union side is much, much larger in terms of population, I think about 22 million people.

And it is what we would today recognize as all the states basically north of Virginia.

The south is the states in the south of the Mason-Dixon line, so Virginia and there on south, west through Tennessee.

So Texas, for example, is in the Confederacy, Tennessee is in the Confederacy, but other states like Missouri are border states.

And the Confederacy is a much smaller entity, it's made up of about 9 million people plus about 4 million slaves.

And it is a agricultural economy, whereas the northern economy is a more industrializing economy.

Interestingly enough, the Confederate states are in some ways more international than the northern states because they are exporters of cotton, exporters of tobacco.

So they actually have very strong international economic ties, very strong ties to Great Britain.

The United States was the largest source of cotton to the world before the Civil War.

Egypt replaces that a little bit during the Civil War.

But all the English textiles were American cotton from the south.

And so it is the southern half of what we would call the eastern part of the United States today with far fewer people.

It's made up, the Confederacy is, of landed families.

South in the Confederacy was land and slaves.

The northern United States is made up predominantly of small business owners and then larger financial

interests such as the banks in New York.

And what about the military?

Who are the people that picked out guns?

What are the numbers there?

So the union also outnumbered the Confederacy.

By far, but it is a really interesting question because there's no conscription in the Constitution.

Like most other countries, our democracy is formed on the presumption that human beings should not be forced to go into the military if they don't want to.

Most democracies in the world today actually still require military service.

The United States is very rarely in its history.

Done that is not in our Constitution.

So during the Civil War, in the first months and years of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln has to go to the different states, to the governors, and ask the governors for volunteers.

So the men who take up arms, especially in the first months of the war, are volunteers in the north.

In the south, they're actually conscripted.

And then as the war goes on, the union will pass the conscription acts of 1862 and 1863, which for the first time, and this is really important because it creates new presidential powers.

For the first time, Lincoln will have presidential power to force men into the army, which is what leads to all kinds of draft riots in New York and elsewhere.

But suffice it to say, the Union Army throughout the war is often three times the size of the Confederate army.

What's the relationship between this no conscription and people standing up to fight for ideas and the Second Amendment, a well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed?

We're in Texas, so what's the role of that in this story?

Well, the American population is already armed before the war.

And so even though the Union and the Confederate armies will manufacture and purchase arms, it is already an armed population.

So the American presumption going into the war is that citizens will not be forced to serve, but they will serve in militias to protect their own property.

And so the Second Amendment, the key part of the Second Amendment for me as a historian is the well-regulated militia part, the presumption that citizens as part of their civic duty do not have a duty to join a national army, Prussian style, but are supposed to be involved in defending their communities.

And that's the reality.

It's also a bit of a myth.

And so Americans have throughout their history been gun owners, not AK-47 owners, but gun owners.

And gun ownership has been for the purpose of community self-defense.

The question coming out of that is what does that mean in terms of do you have access to everything?

And Antonin Scalia even himself asked this question on the Supreme Court.

He said, in one of the gun cases, you have the right to defend yourself, but you don't have the right to own an Uzi.

You don't have the right to have a tank.

I don't think they'd let you park a tank, Lex, in your parking spot, right?

I looked into this.

I think there's a gray area around tanks, actually.

I think you're legit allowed to own a tank.

Oh, you really?

Well, somebody looked into this because somebody told me, but I could see that because it's very difficult for that to get out of hand.

Right.

Right.

There may be one guy in a tank.

You could be breaking laws in terms of the width of the vehicle that you're using to operate.

Anyway, that's a hilarious discussion.

But to make the case, speaking of AK-47s and rifles, and back to Ukraine for a second, one of the fascinating social experiments that happened in Ukraine at the beginning of the war is they handed out guns to everybody, rifles, and crime went down, which I think is really interesting.

Yeah.

I hope somebody does a kind of psychological data collection analysis effort here to try to understand why, because it's not obvious to me that in a time of war, if you give guns to the entire populace, anyone who wants a gun, it's not going to, especially in a country who has historically suffered from corruption, not result in robberies and assaults and all that kind of stuff.

There's a deep lesson there.

Now, I don't know if you can extend that lesson beyond wartime, though.

Right.

That's the question.

What happens after the war?

I mean, my inclination would be to say, that can work during war, but you have to take the guns back after the war.

But they might be very upset when you try to take the guns.

That's the problem.

No, that's precisely the problem.

That's actually part of the story here.

I mean, what happens after the Civil War, after Appomattox in 1865, is that many Southern soldiers go home with their guns and they misuse their weapons to, quite frankly, shoot and intimidate former slaves who are now citizens.

This is a big problem.

I talk about this in the book in Memphis in 1866.

It is former Confederate soldiers and police officers and judges who are responsible for hundreds of rapes within a two-day period and destroying an entire community of African Americans.

And they're able to do that because they brought their guns home.

But underneath the issue of guns there is just the fundamental issue of hatred and inability to see other humans in this world as having equal value as another human being.

What was the election of 1860 like that brought Lincoln to power?

So the election of 1860 was a very divisive election.

We have divisive contested elections from 1860 really until 1896.

The 1860 election is the first election where a Republican is elected president.

That is Lincoln.

But he's elected president with less than 40% of the vote because you have two sets of Democrats running, Democrats who are out to defend the Confederacy and everything, and then Democrats who want to compromise but still keep slavery.

Most famous Stephen Douglas who argues for basically allowing each state to make its own decisions, popular sovereignty as he called it.

And then you still have traditional Whigs who are running.

That was the party that preceded the Republican Party.

So you have four candidates.

Lincoln wins a plurality.

Lincoln is elected largely because the states that are anti-slavery or anti-expansion of slavery are not a majority, but they're a plurality.

And the other states have basically a factionalized.

And so they're unable to have a united front against him.

Was the main topic at hand slavery?

I think the main topic at hand at that time was the expansion of slavery into new territories. Into new territories.

Right.

And so the Spanish slavery and not Lincoln is very careful and his correspondence is clear.

He wants no one on his side during the election to say that he's arguing for abolitionism,

even though he personally supported that.

What he wants to say is the Republican Party is for no new slave territories.

Did he make it clear that he was for abolition?

No, he was intentionally unclear about that.

Do you think he was throughout his life?

Is there a deep, because that takes quite a vision, like you look at society today, and it takes quite a man to see that there's something deeply broken where a lot of people take for granted.

I mean, into modern day, you could see factory farming is one of those things that in a hundred years we might see as like the torture, the mass torture of animals could be seen as evil.

And just to look around and wake up to that, especially in a leadership position, yeah, was he able to see that?

In some ways, yes.

In some ways, no.

I mean, the premise of your question is really important that to us, it's obvious that slavery is a horror.

But to those who had grown up with it, who had grown up seeing that, it was hard to imagine a different world.

So you're right, Lincoln's imagination, like everyone else's, was limited by his time.

I don't think Lincoln imagined a world of equality between the races, but he had come to see that slavery was horrible.

And historians have differed in how he came to this.

Part of it is that he had a father who treated him like a slave.

And you can see in his early correspondence how much he hates that his father, who was a struggling farmer, was basically trying to control Lincoln's life.

And he came to understand personally, I think how horrible it is to have someone else tell you what you should do with your labor, not giving you your own choices.

But Lincoln was also a pragmatist.

This is what made him a great politician.

He wanted to work through institutions, not to burn them down.

And he famously said that if he could preserve the union and stop the spread of slavery by allowing slavery to stay in the South, he would.

If he could do it by eliminating slavery in the South, he would.

If he could do it by buying the slaves and sending them somewhere else, he would.

His main goal, what he ran on, was that the new territories west of Illinois, that they would be areas for free, poor white men like him, not slavery.

What do you learn about human nature if you step back and look at the big picture of it?

That slavery has been a part of human civilization for thousands of years, that this American slavery is not a new phenomenon.

I think history teaches us a very pessimistic and a very optimistic lesson.

The pessimistic lesson is that human beings are capable of doing enormous harm and brutality to their fellow man and woman.

And we see that with genocide in our world today.

That human beings are capable with the right stimuli, the right incentives of enslaving

others.

I mean, genocide is in the same category, right?

The optimistic side is that human beings are also capable with proper leadership and governance of resisting those urges, of putting those energies into productive uses for other people.

But I don't think that comes naturally.

I think that's where leadership and institutions matter.

But leadership and institutions contain us.

We contain.

We can civilize ourselves.

For a long time, we stopped using that verb to civilize.

I believe in civilization.

I believe there's a civilizing role, Lincoln spoke of that, right?

So did Franklin Roosevelt, the civilizing role that government plays.

Education is only a part of that.

It's creating laws, minimal laws, but laws nonetheless that incentivize and penalize us for going to the dark side.

But if we allow that to happen, or we have leaders who encourage us to go to the dark side, we can very quickly go down a deep dark tunnel.

See, I believe that most people want to do good and the power of institutions, if done well, they encourage and protect you if you want to do good.

So if you're just in the jungle, from a game theoretic perspective, you get punished for doing good.

So being extremely self-centered and greedy and even violent and manipulative can have from a game theory perspective benefits.

But I don't think that's what most humans want.

Institutions allow you to do what you actually want, which is to do good for the world, do good for others, and actually in so doing, do good for yourself.

Institutions protect that natural human instinct, I think.

And what you just articulated, which I think the historical record is very strong on, is the classic liberal position.

That's what liberalism means in a 19th century sense, right?

Which you believe in civilizing human beings through institutions, that begins with education, kindergarten is an institution, laws, and just basic habits that are enforced by society.

How do you think people thought about the idea?

How do they square the idea of all men are created equal, those very powerful words at the founding of this nation?

How do they square that with slavery?

For many Americans saying all men were created equal required slavery because it meant that the equality of white people was dependent upon others doing the work for us.

In the way some people view animal labor today.

And maybe in 50 years, we'll see that as a contradiction.

But the notion among many Americans in the 17th, 18th century, and this would also be true for those in other societies was that equality for white men meant that you had access to the labor of others that would allow you to equalize other differences.

So you could produce enough food so your family could live equally well nourished as other families because you had slaves on the land doing the farming for you.

This is Thomas Jefferson's world.

So it's like animal farm, all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.

That's right.

And I think that's still the way people view things.

Yeah.

Right?

I don't know if that's a liberal position or it's just a human position that all humans have equal value just on the basic level of humanity.

But do we really believe that?

We want to.

I don't know if our society really believes that yet.

And I don't know exactly, I mean, it's super complicated, of course, when you realize the amount of suffering that's going on in the world where there's children dying from starvation in Africa and to say that all humans are equal, well, a few dollars can save their life.

And instead we buy a Starbucks coffee and are willing to pay 10, 50, \$100,000 to save a child, our child, like somebody from our family and don't want to spend \$2 to save a child over in Africa.

So there's, and I think Sam Harris or others have talked about, well, I don't want to live in a world where we'd rather send \$2 to Africa.

There's something deeply human about saving those that are really close to you, the ones we love.

So that hypocrisy that seems to go attention with the basic ethics of alleviating suffering in the world, that's also really human.

That's also part of this ideal of all men are created equal.

It's a complicated, messy world, ethically.

It is, but I mean, I think, at least the way I think about it is, so what are the things even within our own society where we choose to do something with our resources that actually doesn't help the lives of many people?

So we invest in all kinds of things that are often because someone is lobbying for them.

This happens on both sides of the aisle.

This is not a political statement, right?

Rather than saying, you know, if we invested a little more of our money, really a little more, we can make sure every child in this country had decent healthcare.

We can make sure every child in this country had what they needed to start life healthy.

And that would not require us to sacrifice a lot, but it would require us to sacrifice a few things.

Yeah, there's a balance there.

And I also noticed the passive aggressive statement you're making about how I'm spending my money.

Spending it a little more wisely.

I like to eat nice meals at nice restaurants, so I'm as guilty of this as you are.

I got a couch, and that couch serves no purpose.



It looks nice though.

No, it's a nice looking couch.

I appreciate that.

It's actually very clean.

I got it for occasional Instagram photos to look like an adult, okay, because everything else in my life is a giant mess.

What role did the ideas at the founding documents of this country play in this war, the war between the Union and the Confederate States, and the founding ideas that were supposed to be unifying to this country?

Is there interesting tensions there?

Well, there are certainly tensions because built into the founding documents, of course, is slavery and inequality and women's exclusion from voting and things of that sort.

But the real brilliance of Abraham Lincoln is to build on the brilliance of the founders and turn the Union position into the defense of the core ideas of the country.

So the Confederacy is defending one idea, the idea of slavery.

Lincoln takes the basket of all the deeper ideas and puts them together.

Three things the war is about for Lincoln, and this is why his speech is still resonating with us today.

You know, every time I'm in Washington, I go to the Lincoln Memorial.

It's the best memorial, the best monument, I think, in the world actually.

There are always people there reading Gettysburg Address and the second inaugural.

Lincoln had two years of education, yet he found the words to describe what our country was about better than anyone.

And it's because he went back to these founding values, three values.

We already talked about one, freedom.

And freedom is actually complex, but it's also simple.

The simple Lincoln definition is that freedom is the right of each person to work for himself or herself.

Which is to say, it doesn't mean you're on your own company, but it means you control your labor.

And no one can tell you you have to work for a certain wage.

You might not have a job, but you decide.

You decide, right?

You can see where that comes from, his own background as a poor man, right?

So freedom is the control of your own labor.

Second democracy, government of the people, by the people, for the people.

The government is to serve the people, it's to come from the people.

And then the third point, justice and helping all human beings.

He at the end of his life, as the Civil War is ending, he never declares that the South should be punished.

His argument is that we shouldn't apologize for their misdeeds, but that all should be part of this future.

He's not arguing for consensus.

He's arguing for a society where everyone has a stake going forward.

So justice, democracy, freedom.

Those are the gifts.

I talked about the flaws in our system.

Those are the virtues in our system that our founders coming out of the Enlightenment planted.

And Lincoln carries them forward.

He gives us the 2.0 version of them.

So a few tangent questions about each of those.

So one on democracy, people often bring up that the United States is not a democracy.

It's a republic that it's representative.

Is there some interesting tensions there in terminology or is, yeah, can you maybe kind of expand on the different versions of democracy?

So the philosophy of democracy, but also the practical implementations of it.

Sure.

The founders intended for us to be a democracy.

This argument that they wanted us to be a republic instead of a democracy is one of these made up myths.

They believed that fundamentally what they were creating was a society, very few of which had existed before, a society where the government would be of the people, by the people, for the people.

That's what they expected, right?

That's what it meant.

So the legitimacy of our government was not going to be that the person in charge was of royal blood.

That's the way the Europeans did it.

Or that the person in charge had killed enough people, a la Genghis Khan, or that the person in charge was serving a particular class.

It was that the person in charge, the institutions were to serve the people.

They adopted republican tools to get there because they were fearful appropriately of simply throwing every issue up to the masses.

Democracy is not mob rule.

Democracy is where you create procedures to assess the public will and to act in ways that serve the public without harming other elements of the public that are not in the majority.

That's why we have a constitution and a bill of rights.

For their time, the founders did not believe that women should be part of this discussion, that they were not capable.

They were wrong about that.

But in their time, that's how they thought, we've of course changed that.

They believed you had to have property to have a stake.

We don't believe that anymore.

So we can argue over the details and those 50 years from now will criticize us for the way we think about these things.

But it was fundamentally about this is the radicalism of the American experiment that government should serve the people, all people.

So democracy means of the people, by the people, for the people.

And then it doesn't actually give any details of how you implement that, because you could implement all kinds of voice.

And I think what we've learned as historians, I think what the founders knew, because they were very well read in the history of Rome and Greece, was that democracy will always have unique characteristics for the culture that it's in.

If coming out of the war against Russia, Ukraine is able to build a better democracy than it had before, it's never going to look like the United States.

I'm not saying it's going to be worse or better, a culture matters.

The particular history of societies matters.

Japan is a vibrant democracy.

I've been there many times.

It does not look at all like the American democracy.

So democracy is a set of values.

The implementation of those values is a set of practical institutional decisions one makes based in one's cultural position.

So just the link on that topic, if you do representative, you said democracy should not, one failure mode is mob rule.

So it should not descend into that.

Not every issue should be up to everybody.

Correct.

Okay.

So you have representation, but Stalin similarly felt that he could represent the interests of the public.

He was also helping represent the interests of the public.

So that's a failure mode too.

If the people representing the public become more and more powerful, they start becoming detached from actually being able to represent or having just a basic human sense of what the public wants.

I think being of the people by the people for the people means you are in some way accountable to the people.

And the problem with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, this was already evident before Stalin came into power, is the same problem the Communist Party of China has today, which is that you have leadership that's not accountable.

Well, let me go then to one of the other three principles of freedom because one of the ways to keep government accountable is the freedom of the press.

So there's the internet and on the internet, there's social networks and one of them is called Twitter.

I think you have an account there, people should follow you.

And recently people have been throwing around recently for a while the words of freedom of speech.

Just out of curiosity, for tangent upon a tangent, what do you think of freedom of speech?

Is it as today and as it was at that time during the Civil War after the Civil War and throughout the history of America?

So freedom of speech has always been one of the core tenets of American democracy. And I'm near absolutist on it because I think that people should have the right to speak. What makes our democracy function is that there is always room for, quite frankly, people like you and me who like to disagree and have reasons to disagree. So I am against almost all forms of censorship. The only time I believe in censorship is if somehow an individual or a newspaper has stolen the Ukrainian plans for their next military movements in the next week. You should not be able to publish that right now, maybe after they act. But criticism, opinion, interpretation should be wide open. Now that doesn't mean, though, that you have the right to come to my classroom and start shouting and saying whatever you want. You have the right on the street corner to do that. But my classroom is a classroom for my students with a particular purpose. Sorry about that. From last week, I'll never do it again. I apologize. I'm really sorry. It's okay. Never happened. I'm drunk. So the people who don't know you're Professor UT Austin, it's just nearby. So sometimes I get a little drunk and wander in there. I apologize. You're not the only one. Was that you? I didn't even know it was you. The point is that free speech is not licensed to invade someone else's space. And I also believe in private enterprise. So I think that if I owned a social media network, I don't. It would be up to me to decide who gets to speak on that network and who doesn't. And then people could decide not to use it if they don't want to use it. But there's, so yes, that's one of the founding principles. So oftentimes when you talk about censorship, that's government censorship. So social media, if you run a social media company, you should be able to decide from a technical perspective of what freedom of speech means. But there's some deeper ethical philosophical sense of how do you create a world where every voice is heard of the people by the people for the people? That's a complicated technical problem. When you have a public square, how do you have a productive conversation where critics aren't silenced, but at the same time, whoever has the bigger megaphone is not going to crowd out everybody else. So I think it's very important to create rules of the game that give everyone a chance to get started and that allow for guideposts to be created from the will of the community, which is to say that we as a community can say, we can't stop people from speaking,

but we as a community can say that in certain forms, we're going to create certain rules for who gets to speak and who doesn't, under what terms, but they can still have somewhere else to go.

And I believe in opening space for everyone, but creating certain spaces within those spaces that are designed for certain purposes.

That's what a school does.

So I will not bring someone to speak to my students who is unqualified.

It's not a political judgment.

The rules at a university or we're an educational institution, you need to have the educational credentials to come speak about artificial intelligence.

I'm not going to bring some bum off the street to do that.

We have certain rules, but that bum on the street can still, in his own space or her own space, can still say what he or she wants to say about artificial intelligence.

This is how newspapers work.

When I write for the New York Times, they have an editorial team.

The editorial team makes certain decisions.

They check facts and there are certain points of view.

They don't allow anti-submitted comments.

You're not going to be able to publish an anti-submitted screed, whether you think it's true or not true in the New York Times, but that doesn't prevent you from finding somewhere else.

So we allow entities to create certain rules of the game.

We make transparent what those rules are, and then we as citizens know where to go to get our information.

What's been a problem the last few decades, I think, is it hasn't been clear what the rules are in different places and what are the legitimate places to get information and what are not.

Yeah, the transparency seems to be very critical there.

Even from the New York Times, I think there's a lot of skepticism about which way the editorial processes lean.

I mean, there's a public perception that it's, especially for opinions, it's going to be very left-leaning in the New York Times.

And without transparency about what the process is like, about the people involved, conspiracy theories and the general public opinion about that is going to go wild.

And I think that's okay for the New York Times.

People can, in a collective way, figure stuff out.

Like, they could say, okay, New York Times, 73% of the time is going to lean left in their head to have a loose estimation or whatever.

But for a platform like Twitter, it seems like it's more complicated.

Now, of course, there should be rules of the game, but I think there's, maybe I want to say a responsibility to also create incentives for people to do high-effort empathetic debate versus throwing poop at each other.

Yeah.

I think those are two slightly different things, so I agree.

I think that my view is that the failure of Facebook and Twitter and others in recent years has been that they have been completely untransparent about their rules. So what I would think would advance us is if they had a set of rules that were clear, that were consistently followed, and we understood what they were, that would also tell us as consumers what the biases are, how to understand what's going on. It seems, if I might say, that since Elon Musk has taken over Twitter, it's been arbitrary and who's thrown off, and who's not thrown off, and that's a real problem. Arbitrariness is in some ways the opposite of democracy. But there's also a hidden arbitrariness in interpretation of the rules. So for example, what comment incites violence, that's really, really difficult to figure out to me. There's a gray area. Obviously, there's very clear versions of that, but if I know anything about people that try to incite violence, they're usually not coming out and clearly saying it. They're usually kind of dog whistling it. And same with racism and anti-Semitism, all of that. It's usually dog whistles. And they usually have fun playing with the rules, playing around the rules. So it's a gray area. Same with June COVID, misinformation. What's misinformation? Right? And some of these are age-old problems. Our legal system, common law, has been struggling with what is incitement to violence since the first Supreme Court decisions in the 18th century. So you're absolutely right. But I will say this. There are certain things that are clearly incitement to violence. I'll give you very clear examples. I'll just make it personal. My wife is an elected official here in Austin. There have been people who put things up on Twitter calling for her to be hanged or calling for her to be attacked. It's incitement to violence when you specifically call for violence against someone. I agree. There's a lot of other stuff where it's a gray area, but we could start if we're applying these rules by getting that material off of these sites. So some of that is a problem of scale too. But the gray area is still a forever problem that we may never be able to solve. And maybe the tension within the gray area is the very process of democracy. But saying like, we need to take our country back. Is that incitement to violence? I don't think that. I think we need to take our country back.

Just that?

No.

Because I might say that.

I might say we need to take our...

I say that all the time.

Again, I walk around drunk just screaming at everybody.

I thought you wanted us to take you back.

Exactly.

I was very confused.

My messaging needs to work.

But let's go to the January 6th example, right?

To say hang Mike Pence, that's incitement to violence.

To say, go get Nancy, that's incitement to violence.

Yeah.

That's very clear.

Again, I don't think that's the big problem.

The big problem is the gray area.

And the other problem is just how to get... how to technically find the large scale of comments and posts and so on that are doing this kind of clear...

Yeah, but this is something for you to solve.

You're the...

I understand.

I understand.

I mean, don't ask me those questions.

Well, I have to say some of that is motivation, some of that is vision, and some of that is execution.

Yeah.

So, for example, just to go briefly on a dark topic, something I've recently become aware of is Facebook and Twitter and so on.

People post violence on there, like videos of violence, child porn, some of the darkest things in this world.

And to find them at scale is a difficult problem.

And to act in an aggressively is a difficult problem.

But I think part of this motivation, like saying this is a big problem, we need to take this on.

We need to find all the darkest aspects of human nature that rise and appear on our platform and remove them so that we can create a place for humanity to flourish through the process of conversation.

But it's just hard.

It's just really hard.

When you look at millions of posts, trillions of interactions, it's wild with the amount of data.

But where we are now with social media seemed wild and impossible five years ago, right?

Yes.

Actually, what frustrates me is I think they're people who have politicized this issue in unnecessary ways.

Everyone, regardless of their politics, should support what you just said.

Investing our money, maybe grants from the federal government in AI-skilled people like you figuring out ways to get violent videos off of there.

That shouldn't be political.

Well, some of that also requires being transparent from a social media company perspective and being transparent in a way that really resists being political, to be able to be transparent about your fight against these evils while still not succumbing to the political narratives of it.

That's tricky.

But you have to do that kind of... Walk calmly through the fire.

That's what Twitter feels like if you're being political, it's like a firing squad from every side.

As a leader, you have to walk calmly.

That is where we need a new generation of people who will have diverse politics, but will stand up against that, right?

The lesson from after the Civil War is where progress is made.

The war doesn't solve problems of hate.

Where progress is made is where you have local leaders and others who stand up and say, we can differ, but we're not going... We're going to stop calling people from certain backgrounds monkeys, which was a common thing to do at that time.

Jews are still called monkeys in certain places, right?

People have to stand up while still maintaining their political differences.

Several hundred thousand people died.

What made this war such a deadly war?

It's extraordinary how many people died, more than half a million.

This was without a single automatic rifle, without a single bomb.

It was mostly in hand-to-hand combat, which is to say that these 600,000 or so people who died, they died where the person who killed them was standing within a few feet of them.

That's really hard.

Most of the killing that happens in wars today is actually from a distance.

It's by a drone, it's by a bomb, it's by a rocket, or by an automatic weapon.

Just to make this even more focused, to this day, the deadliest day in American history was during the Civil War.

September 1862, in Antietam, more than 22,000 Americans killed one another hand-to-hand.

There hasn't been a day that deadly in American history since then.

That's amazing considering the technological changes.

What was in the mind of those soldiers on each side?

Was their conviction for ideas, did they hate the other side?

I think actually they were fighting out of fear.

What we know from reading their letters, what we know from the accounts is that, yes, they're ideas that are promoted to them to get them to the battlefield.

They believe in what they're doing, but here it's the same as World War I, and I think



the Civil War and World War I are very similar as wars.

You are in these horrible conditions, you're attacked, and you have the chance to either kill the other side and live or die.

You fight to live, and you fight to save the people next to you.

What is true about war, what is both good and dangerous about it, is you form an almost unparalleled bond with those on your side.

This is the men under arms scenario, and that's where the killing goes, and it's a civil war, which means sometimes it's brother against brother, quite literally, and what it teaches us is how human beings can be put into fighting and will commit enormous damage.

That's why this happens.

It goes on for four years.

In just the extensive research you've done on this war for this book, what are some of the worst and some of the best aspects of human nature that you found?

Like you said, brother against brother, that's pretty powerful.

They're both, right?

The level of violence that human beings are capable of, how long they're able to sustain it.

The South should not have, the Confederacy should not have lasted in this war as long as it did.

By the end, they're starving, and they keep fighting.

The resilience in war of societies and the power of hate to move people.

What are the bright sides?

You see in Lincoln and Grant, who I talk about a lot in the book as well, Ulysses Grant, you see the ability of empathetic figures to still rise above this in spite of all the horror.

Lincoln went to visit more soldiers in war than any president ever has, often at personal peril because he was close to the lines, and he connected.

It wasn't propaganda, there weren't always reporters following him.

He was able to build empathy in this context.

And I think, as I said, war is horrible as it is, often gives opportunities to certain groups.

So African-Americans, former slaves, are able to prove themselves as citizens.

Jews did this, an enormous number in World War II.

Henry Kissinger, who I wrote about before, he really only gets recognized as an American.

He's a German-Jewish immigrant.

He's seen as an American because of his service in World War II.

So the bright side of this is that often in the case of war, on your own side, you will let go of some of your prejudices.

Ulysses Grant has a total transformation.

He goes into the Civil War, an anti-Semite and a racist.

He comes out with actually very enlightened views because he sees what Jewish soldiers and what African-American soldiers did.

What's Ulysses Grant's story?

Did you learn from him?

Was he a hero or a villain of this war?

I think he's a hero, though he's a flawed hero, as all heroes are.

He's a man from Ohio and Illinois, who was really a failed businessman, time and again, and had an ability to command people in war.

Where did this come from?

He was a clear communicator and an empathetic figure.

He tended to drink too much, but he was the kind of person people wanted to follow.

They trusted him.

And so in battle, that became very important.

And the second thing is, he did his homework.

He had a sense of the terrain, he had a sense of the environment he was operating in, and he was ruthless in pursuing what he had studied.

So he turns out at battles like Vicksburg and elsewhere to actually undertake some pretty revolutionary maneuvers, and then he figures out that the advantage now is on his side in numbers, and he just pounds him to death, similar to what the United States does at the end of World War II with Germany and Japan.

He comes out of the war grant, does.

He's a believer in union.

He wants to protect former slaves and other groups, and he tries to use the military for that purpose.

He's limited.

And then as president, he tries to do that as well.

Right now, we still use many of the laws that were passed during Grant's presidency to prosecute insurrectionists.

So the 900 or so people who have been prosecuted for breaking into the Capitol and attacking police on January 6th, those insurrectionists, they've been prosecuted under the 1871 anti-Cluck Klan law.

So that's a big accomplishment by Grant, and we still benefit from it.

The problem is Grant was not a great politician.

Unlike Lincoln, he didn't give good speeches.

He wasn't a persuasive figure in a political space, and so he had trouble building support for what he was doing, even though he was trying to do what in the end, I think, were the right things.

What was the role of the KKK at that time?

So the Ku Klux Klan is formed at the end of the Civil War by Confederate veterans, first in Tennessee and Pulaski, Tennessee, and then it spreads elsewhere, and there are other groups that are similar, the red shirts and various others.

These are veterans of the Confederate army who come home and are committed to continuing the war.

They are going to use their power at home and their weapons to intimidate and if necessary kill people who challenge their authority, not just African Americans, Jews, Catholics, various others.

They are going to basically protect the continued rule of the same families who own the slaves before in post-slavery, Tennessee and post-slavery, South Carolina.

And when we get to voting, they're often the groups that are preventing people from voting. The white sheets and the ritual around that was all an effort to provide a certain ritualistic legitimacy and hide identity, though everyone knew who they were.

Oh, so that whole brand, that whole practice was there from the beginning?

Have you studied the KKK's history a little bit?

I have and there are a number of other historians who have too, so I've used their research as well.

I'm kind of curious.

I have to admit that my knowledge of it is very kind of caricature knowledge.

I'm sure there's interesting stories and threads because I think there's different competing organizations or something like that within the United States.

And I feel like through that lens, you can tell a story of the United States also of these different...

They're often business associations.

I mean, there's a lot of work showing that actually people joined the KKK for the reasons I just laid out, but also because it was networking for your business.

You gained legitimacy in the area that you were in.

So these were community groups that were formed to help white business people.

They helped white sheriffs get elected.

What we have to understand today is when we're debating policing, this history matters enormously, right?

I have nothing against police.

My cousin, one of my closest relatives just retired from 25 years in the New York Police Department.

Thank God he survived.

I have deep respect.

He's one of the best public servants I know.

But what we also have to recognize as we respect police officers is that for many communities in our country, they know this history.

And the KKK in the 1870s and in the 1930s, you look at any KKK organization as I have in my research and you find the police chiefs or the KKK members, the local police officers, local judges, because it was how you became police chief.

So these groups infiltrated some of the main institutions in our nation.

I don't even think they infiltrated.

I think they were part of those institutions.

The deeper question today in the 21st century is, one, how much of that is still there and how much of the history of that reverberates through the institutions.

And I'm making the latter point that it's not there that much now, but people remember it.

Well, as some people would even say, it's not there at all.

There is not institutional racism or policing.

But if that's the case, then you can also say that if there is not direct institutional racism there, what is it?

The echoes of history still have effects.

Of course.

And that's really important in that we have to take that seriously.

That's not an excuse for people then saying nasty things about the police.

But it is what we have to recognize.

Look, I'm Jewish and there are certain elements of Russian behavior today I see in Ukraine that reverberate with the history of how my grandparents dealt with pogroms in Russia.

Even though what Putin is doing in Ukraine might not technically be a pogrom, that history matters in how I view these issues.

And that's a reality.

Yeah.

I went to 7-Eleven recently.

And what did I eat?

One of their salads, I'm sorry, I love 7-Eleven, I'm sorry, I ate one of the salads and got like terrible food poisoning.

I was suffering for like four days.

And now I can't, I love 7-Eleven, I love going to 7-Eleven late at night in sweatpants and just I escaped the world.

I'm listening to an audiobook and now every time I pass that salad for the rest of my life I would have hate for that salad.

So history matters.

Even if the salad is no longer have any bad stuff in it, it's probably the lettuce or something, whatever, mostly for humor's sake.

But I'm also giving a kind of metaphor that history can have an individual and a large scale society effect on human interactions, both the good and the bad.

If you actually recommend to me offline, books on the KKK, they'll be really happy to.

There were a few mentioned in the footnotes in my book here.

And also in part, because I also want to understand the white nationalism, white supremacist, Christian supremacist or Christian nationalism, all those different subgroups in the United States and elsewhere in the world, I'm a bit, my mind has been focused on some of the better aspects of human nature that it's nice to also understand some of the darker aspects.

Let me ask you sort of a personal question for me.

Do you think it's possible, do you think it's useful to do a podcast conversation with somebody like David Duke or somebody, this was somebody that everybody knows, so it's not like you're giving a platform to somebody that's a hidden member of the KKK or like a, it's sort of putting a pretty face on some dark ideas, but everybody knows.

And so now you're just exploring, you're sitting across the table.

Maybe not in his case, maybe somebody who's an active KKK member sitting across from a person that literally hates me, Lex.

I think that's fascinating to explore them.

I think so long as what you are doing is not boosting someone, so taking an obscure figure and making that figure now famous, but if it's someone who's already infamous and it helps us to understand them, and if so long as your effort is to ask them tough questions, what you do, you don't give them all the questions in advance, you don't have limitations on what you can ask, so long as it is a real interview, not pablum, then I'm for it.

What I'm against is a softball interview that allows someone to sound reasonable when they're not.

But the way I've seen you do this, when you've had figures like that, I won't name who I even mind, but when I've seen that, I think that's useful because honestly, the historian in me and the citizen in me wants to understand.

My Jewish grandfather always was the first to be against any effort to suppress anti-Semites because his view was he wanted to know who they were and he wanted to know what they thought so he could be prepared.

And I also see, perhaps as a historian, you may be able to appreciate this kind of thing, that's probably how you see the world, but there's several ways to see a human being like Vladimir Putin is an example.

One is a political figure that's currently doing actions in the world, geopolitics internally, the politics of Russia, but there's also that human being in a historical context and collecting information about that person in the historical context is also very valuable.

So you could see interviews with Hitler in 39, 40, 41 as being very bad and detrimental to all that is good in the world.

But at the same time, it's important to understand that human mind, how it, how power affects that mind, how power corrupts it, how they see the world.

Absolutely.

Absolutely.

I would be all in favor and maybe he will if Vladimir Putin would sit down with you.

Absolutely.

I don't think you're boosting someone like that when you ask them tough questions.

In fact, I think that's what we need to do.

Those sorts of figures tend to insulate themselves from tough questions.

So just to restate, I am for the Lex Fridman interview of those sorts of figures.

I am not for the puff piece on Fox and Friends where they just come on and they're asked, oh, isn't it?

Tell us what you think of this, tell us what you think of that.

So there's a balance there because a lot of people that interviews somebody like Vladimir Putin, all they do is hard hitting questions.

They often demonstrate a lack of knowledge of the perspective of the Russian people and the president.

There's not an empathy to understanding that this is a popularly elected.

You can criticize that notion, but this is still there that represents the beliefs of a large number of people and they have their own life story.

They see the world.

They believe they're doing good for the world.

And that idea seems to not permeate the questions and the thoughts that people say because they're afraid of being attacked by the people back home fellow journalists for not being hard enough.

Well, maybe.

I think that's probably true.

I think in my experience with interviewers is that a lot of them are really lazy.

You're not, which is why I like talking to you.

Can I just say, okay, this is not you saying it.

Can I just rant?

If you're sitting across from Xi Jinping or from Vladimir Putin, you should be fired if you have not read at least several books on the guy.

The surprising lack of research that people do leading up to it.

So you need to be a historian or a biographer.

You need to be the kind of person that writes biographies or histories before you sit in front of the person, not a low effort journalist.

And it's so surprising to me that I think they're probably really busy and it's probably not part of the culture of the people that do interviews to do deep, deep like investigative you need to be the kind of person that lives that idea.

Like see it as a documentary that you work on for three years kind of thing.

Anyway, that, of course, some journalists do do that and they do that masterfully and that's the best of journalism.

But I think a lot of the times when the questions are, as you said, out of touch with the society that person is leading, it's because the interviewer hasn't taken the time.

And I understand you can't be an expert on every subject, but you can do what you do.

You read my book to prepare for this.

You look things up.

You had a sense of the person you're talking to and you put the time in to do that.

This is what I always tell my students.

The secret to success in anything is outworking other people.

Be more prepared.

What you show is like an iceberg.

It's the tip of the iceberg.

That is what people see, it's all the work that goes on below the surface.

And if you work hard enough, which I aspire to do, at the end of the day, just like an animal farm, you'll be like the horse boxer and slaughtered unjustly by those that are much more powerful than you.

But you'll be happy when you're slaughtered.

You have lived for the right ideal and history will remember you fondly.

Okay.

What about Robert E. Lee?

So he's the confederate generally that you mentioned.

Was he a hero or a villain?

To me, he's a villain.

Many people treat Robert E. Lee as a hero, and one of the points I make in the book is we have to rethink that.

And it's very important for our society because Robert E. Lee pops up all over our society names of schools, names of streets, and he also embeds and justifies certain behaviors that I think are really bad.

Lee was a tremendous general.

He had the weaker side and he managed to use maneuver, secrecy, and circumstance to give

himself so many advantages and win so many battles he should have lost.

So in terms of the technical generalship, he's a great general.

But Lee at the end of the war never wants to really acknowledge defeat.

What he acknowledges at Appomattox is that his soldiers will have to leave the battlefield

because they have not won on the battlefield, but he refuses to do what Grant asks him,

which is to help sell his side on the fact that we're going into a post-war moment where

they don't have to see themselves as losers, but they have to get on board with change.

Real leadership is convincing people who follow you that they have to change when they don't want to change.

Lee refuses to do that.

He says to Grant, I quote this in the book, he says to Grant at Appomattox, if you want to change the South, you have to run your army over the South three or four times.

He's not going to do anything.

He's not going to help.

And he becomes a figure who people rally around in the rest of his life and even after he dies.

So it is as if at the end of World War II, Hitler had been allowed to just retire and

he didn't go back into politics, but yet he was there and he continued to have meetings

with former Nazis and people would rally around the idea of bringing back or going back to Hitler's ideas.

Think of how harmful that would be.

Lee played that kind of role after the war.

And I think it's one of the problems we have now.

I don't think we should continue to revere him because it justifies too much of what the Confederates stood for.

And that's the difference that you highlight between World War II and the Civil War, that in the case of Hitler, there was an end to that war.

There's a very distinctive clear end to that war.

And you also make the case that World War II is not a good example, not a good model of a war to help us analyze history.

It's given Americans the wrong idea of what war is because World War II ends as most wars don't end.

World War II ends with the complete defeat of the German army and the German society and the near complete defeat of Japan.

And we're both sides in different ways, except defeat.

What I'm pointing out in the book is that most wars don't end with one side accepting defeat.

And generally the war continues after the battles end.

This is something that's hard for Americans to understand.

Our system is built with the presumption of a war is over when we sign a piece of paper.

Everyone can go home.

It's not what happens.

I mean, civil war is a special case.

It's especially a strong case of that because the people that fought the war are still living

in that land.

That's exactly right.

And in this case, some of them are leaders also.

Many of them become the leaders of the very areas that they were leading before.

And I think that's another lesson here too, that we did undertake after World War II though in a flawed way.

We had a Nuremberg system.

We did prohibit at least Nazi leaders from coming back into power.

We made an exception for the emperor in Japan, but we generally followed the same rule in Japan.

Whereas in the United States, as I point out, many of the leaders of the Confederacy, first of all, don't surrender.

They flee to Mexico.

Then they come back after they lose in Mexico a second time.

They come back to the United States and they get elected to office.

The guy who writes the election laws in Texas, Alexander Watkins Terrell.

People don't know this, even in Texas.

He was a Confederate general, fled to Mexico, so he committed treason by joining the army of Maximilian emperor of Mexico, who was put in power by Louis Napoleon.

After Maximilian's defeated, Alexander Watkins Terrell comes back to Texas, runs for the state legislature, and then writes the election laws.

It's crazy.

Can you make the case for that?

That's a feature of the American system, not a bug, that that is an implementation of justice, that you forgive, that you don't persecute everybody on the other side of the war.

Maybe.

I think that's a good feature in terms of lower level individuals, but I think a bad feature of our system is we do allow elite figures who have committed wrongdoing.

We give them many ways to get out of punishment.

You are more likely to be punished in the society if you do something wrong and you're not an elite figure than if you are an elite figure.

That's true.

Like forgiveness should be equally distributed across the world.

And it's not.

Yeah.

And it's not.

But we could change that.

We could fix that.

How do we fix that?

How do we fix that?

What I think was argued at the end, this is one of the really important things about studying history, you learn about ideas that were not pursued that could be pursued today.

At the end of this war, there was an effort to ban anyone who was in a leadership position



in the Confederacy from ever serving in federal office again.

That's the third element of the 14th Amendment.

It's in the 14th Amendment.

The 14th Amendment Clause 3 says that if you took an oath of office, meaning you were elected to office, you're an elite figure, and you violated that oath, you can still live in the country.

You can still get rich, but you can't run for elected office again.

And we've never really implemented that.

Is it obvious that everybody who was in a leadership position on the Confederate side is a bad person for the future of the United States?

Or is that just a safe thing to assume for the future of the nation?

I think it's the latter.

People do things for all kinds of reasons, and sometimes they have regrets.

That's also why we have the pardoning capability.

You could pardon someone individually if they show you that they've changed.

And it would only create fairness, because right now, let's say, Lex, you take out a huge, huge loan, and you don't pay your loan back.

That will go on your credit, and you won't get a big loan again.

You don't get to say, just give me another chance, you're going to have to prove.

I think about holding public office in the same way.

If you've violated your credit rating on that, you should have a much higher road to go to prove to us that you should be back in office.

How did the war end in quotes?

So you said, and you make this case in the book, that in some sense, the elements, the tensions behind the civil continue to this day, but officially, how did the war end?

So officially, the war ends at Appomattox in the early spring of 1865, when Grant has pretty much smashed Robert E. Lee's army.

Appomattox Courthouse is a small town in Virginia, and the two men meet, and their portraits of this is a painting of it we have in the book, and Grant and Lee sign a paper which basically allows Lee's soldiers to leave the battlefield and leave with their sidearms to go back home.

That's pretty much the end.

Jefferson Davis was the president of the Confederacy goes into hiding.

He's later captured and then not convicted, but there's no formal settlement in the way there is at the end of World War II, where they meet in Yokohama Bay, the U.S. and Japanese leaders inside that.

This is not that.

So what stands out to you as brilliant ideas during this time and actions of Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln?

So I mentioned that his values, I think a number of the things that he does that are quite extraordinary.

First, in emancipating the slaves.

Now the slaves were freeing themselves, but Lincoln recognizes that he needs more labor in the Union army, and he recognizes that there's still a lot of resistance.

And what he does is he makes the case for freeing the slaves based on the argument not just of the moral value of that, but based on how that will benefit the North.

He's able to convince non-abolitionists to pursue abolitionist policies by serving their own interests.

What he's basically saying by 1863 or 1864 is, I can ask for more white soldiers, or I can bring in former slaves.

Would you like me to take your son, or would you like me to put in... It's the same thing Franklin Roosevelt does during World War II.

He says, we need to build more planes and more tanks, and I'm sending all the soldiers off to Europe.

I've got this African-American population in the South.

Wouldn't you like me to move them up to Chicago so we can win this war and build things in the factories?

So Lincoln uses the war to move the country forward morally, even if at times he's convincing people by using other reasons, and I think that's great politics.

I guess that's one of the components of great leadership is do the right thing for the wrong reasons, or publicly sounding wrong reasons.

Find ways to move people.

What we talked about before, different stories move different people.

So you can tell different stories.

He tells one set of stories to the religious leaders who are abolitionists, and a different set of stories to the New York bankers, and that's leadership.

You tell different kinds of stories to move people to a new position.

The other thing Lincoln is really brilliant at is managing the international side of this.

So one of the real dangers for the Union is that the British will come in on the side of the Confederacy.

The Confederates expected the British would, because again, the Confederates were selling while they're cotton to Britain.

And they knew that the British leadership, first of all, was very happy to work with slaveholding societies, even though they didn't have slaves.

And number two, that they believe the Union was getting too strong and threatening the British in Canada.

So there were many reasons the British might have gone in with the Confederates.

Lincoln mixes sticks and carrots with the British.

He threatens them, and when the British actually try to send diplomats to negotiate with Southerners,

he interdicts that.

He basically initiates a quarantine of the South.

On the other hand, he reaches out to them and tries to show that he wants better relations and makes the argument that they will actually benefit more from having the industrial capability of the Union on their side.

So he's a very good diplomat.

He is considered to be one of the great presidents in the history of the United States.

Are there ways that he failed?

Is there things he could have done better?

So he failed in the ways that most great leaders fail, which is that he had a terrible succession plan.

His vice president, who I spend a lot of time on in the book, Andrew Johnson, who is probably our worst president ever, Andrew Johnson had no business being anywhere near the presidency. Andrew Johnson was the only Southern senator who did not secede.

And so even though he was a Democrat, Lincoln wanted to show that he was creating a unity ticket when he ran for reelection in 1864.

This happens today, right?

So he put someone on as vice president, who he didn't even like, but who he thought was politically useful.

Problem is, when Lincoln was assassinated, this guy took over.

Andrew Johnson was drunk at his own inauguration.

The guy was a true drunkard.

He was not prepared to lead in any sense, intellectually, politically, and he was against most of the principles Lincoln was for.

And the irony is that when Lincoln is assassinated in April of 1865, Andrew Johnson takes over and he has all the war powers Lincoln had.

That was not good planning by Lincoln.

And we can look back on it now and say, even though Lincoln is the first president who was assassinated, he should have known that there were people coming for him.

It wasn't inevitable that he'd be assassinated, but he should have had a backup plan for who would take over, hopefully someone who was capable of doing the job, and Andrew Johnson was not capable.

So for me, personally, if I were to put myself in Lincoln's shoes or any leadership position shoes, it is difficult to think about what happens after my death, after I'm gone, right, to plan well.

But at the same time, if you care about your actions to have a long-term impact, it seems like you should have a succession plan that continues on the path, continues to carry the ideals that you've implemented.

So I'm not, I'm unsure why people don't do that more often.

Like, I wonder how much Vladimir Putin spends percentage of time per day thinking what happens after he's gone to help flourish the nation and the region that he deeply cares for.

I wonder, and it's the same as for other presidents, Donald Trump, Joe Biden.

They might think politically, like, how do I guarantee that it's a Democrat or a Republican?

But do they think like visionary for the country?

I don't know.

I wonder.

I think that's very rare.

And I think what I understand from the literature among business people who talk about this a lot is what ends up happening is you become so powerful, you assume you're always going to be in power.

You convince yourself of that.

You convince yourself that the end is far away.

And of course, for Lincoln, the end could have been far away.  
He was healthy.  
He was only in his 50s.  
He could have lived a lot longer.  
But it also, it ended fast as it could.  
And my understanding is that most Americans don't prepare their wills and estates, and it doesn't matter whether they're rich or poor.  
They assume things are just going to go on because it's not fun to think about this.  
Yeah.  
But I feel like it's freeing.  
Like, you know what I did, which is interesting, before I went to Ukraine, I recorded a video. I set up a whole thing where I record a video, like, what happens if I die?  
I record a video to release, and I gave my brother access to my passwords so that, and I gave him instructions.  
You're not allowed to look at this, but please publish this if I die.  
And you know, that made me, it sounds silly and ridiculous, but that made me feel free to do the best thing I want to do.  
It's like, it's liberating.  
So like, I guess that's for your will, but also, like, do the best possible damn job you can.  
You know, as a leader, having a plan, what happens if you fail, if you die, if you, or are you lose some of the, some of the power, some of the momentum that is driving you currently, that there's going to be a handoff where you will still, and you will still be remembered as a great man or woman that.  
But you identify one of the other problems, right?  
Which is one of the other reasons why someone like Lincoln or certainly Henry Kissinger doesn't create a successor because you're afraid they're going to steal your passwords.  
You're afraid they're going to steal the power from you.  
You had to find someone in your brother, hopefully, who you could trust, but let's just be clear.  
I love my brother, but he's a troll.  
So, so there's a feature on the pass on whatever password manager I may or may not use.  
And this is, there's a bunch of services like this.  
It's interesting.  
You know about, I've learned about all of this is you can have them request access and it's going to wait 30 days before it gives them access.  
So it's kind of has this built in trust, trust padding.  
But it's interesting.  
I mean, to me, on that aspect is just to have a plan in all aspects of life.  
This is for leadership in your private life.  
Like what happens to not just your will and your wealth, your wealth or whatever, but what happens to other stuff like social media and all of that in this digital world.  
And anything you care about, if you wanted to live on, and that's the problem.  
But if you, unless you can devise a technical solution like that, you have to give someone power now.

Yeah.

And that's the tricky thing.

I mean, democracy is a kind of technology.

You're going to have to figure out how to do it correctly, how to have, how to have that power propagate, and especially during war, how you get everybody together into this warm mongering mood or, and then how do you, how do you like calm, come down from that and just relax.

Precisely.

So in some sense that's what Andrew Johnson knows the problem is the over centralization of power.

It's the over centralization of power, but it was also that Lincoln had a designated successor who was going to do and tried to do everything that ran against what Lincoln was doing.

And it set the country back.

We went forward at the end of the civil war, and then we went backward.

More so than we would have if there had been a new election, because if there had been a new election, there still would be reason for that person running, even if they were on the other side to try to find some compromised positions.

Andrew Johnson inherited power with very few limitations on how he used that power. Congress wasn't even in session.

And so this became very directly a problem because Andrew Johnson started pardoning Southerners, allowing them to come back into power.

So he had like a few months where he just went wild.

Yeah.

It's giving the car keys to someone who's not prepared to drive, but decided that they're going to do what they want with the car for a while.

All right, is there any level to which power corrupted Lincoln, a war president?

Yes, I do think there were some areas.

And I think that even though he was a great president, if not our greatest president, maybe one of the greatest figures of our history, he was flawed.

One is his problem of succession, but also I think Lincoln over-invested in the power of the presidency.

He came to believe too much in the role of one man and not in creating a more balanced approach to governance.

And that's a function of war.

That's where war is dangerous.

War has an inherent centralizing power in a democracy and that is dangerous.

Because even when you have the best of people running a war, that gives them a lot of power to make decisions.

Yeah.

How do you come down from that?

I see that was Zelensky and Putin currently.

Yep.

It's a war.

Because Ukraine and everybody, anybody in a war, kind of, especially if you're fighting for the ideal of democracy, it seems like war is anti-democratic.

It is.

So how do you come down from that?

What's the interesting mechanism of, I mean, some of it is leadership.

You have to be like a George Washington type figure to be able to walk away from power.

I think you gave the answer right there.

You need to walk away from power or you need to be forced to walk away from power.

Historically, one of the things that democracies have tended to do when they have a chance is to vote out of office the victor in the war.

Think about Winston Churchill.

Roosevelt is elected to his fourth term when he's still in the war.

It's not clear that he would have been elected again.

Let's say he lived on.

Because there is a sensibility that the person has become too powerful in this role and that someone else should now step in.

Someone else who's also not a war president but has other interests.

So let's hope Ukraine wins this war, Zelensky should then step down or someone else should be voted in.

It will be dangerous if he remains president.

Let's say he wins somehow and a true victory, which is just hypothetical.

He should not be praised, maybe given a nice villa.

But someone else should take over because the problem is that he's going to have too much power and honestly, he's going to be too out of touch with what the country needs after the war.

What do you think would have happened if Lincoln had lived?

That's the sort of counterfactual view of history.

It's an interesting question that probably you think about a lot.

Sure.

What would have happened if he didn't get assassinated?

It's a reasonable question because it was not inevitable he'd be assassinated.

Right.

He could have had more protection that night.

He had invited Ulysses Grant to go to the theater with him and Grant and his wife didn't go.

If they had been there, there would have been more protection for Grant.

You would have had at least double the security there.

There are many ways in which he might not have died.

I think it still would have been a difficult transition, but I think there were a few things that would have been better.

First of all, Lincoln would not have pardoned all of these Confederate leaders and allowed them to come back into power.

Lincoln also would have been a better politician at holding his Republican coalition together.

I think Lincoln was more committed to empowering former slaves and others.

We still would have had a lot of conflicts, but I think what would have been a degree of difficulty was doubled or tripled because Lincoln was removed and the opposite came into power with Andrew Johnson.

You don't think there's a case you made that Andrew Johnson turned out to be a bad decision, but the spirit of the decision is the correct one?

No.

I think it was a terrible decision because you should never put someone one step away from enormous power who's not prepared.

In that sense, I got it.

But the spirit of the decision, meaning you put somebody who represents a very opposing viewpoint than you.

Well, I'm for that so long as that person is on board with some of the basic values that you're pursuing and that person is capable of doing the job.

Well, do you think that was obvious to him that Andrew Johnson was not capable of doing the job?

Yes.

I mean, everyone recognized that, but it made sense.

What Lincoln has to be praised for is in the midst of a war, when at that point he was not doing well, the war was not going well, he ran for reelection, he didn't try to postpone the election, he didn't try to do anything.

And so he needed all the help he could get when running.

And so he wanted to have someone on there who looked like a unity candidate who could appeal to some Southerners.

So it made sense from a political point of view, but it created a really big problem.

And there were people who said he should have removed Johnson as soon as he was elected and in retrospect he probably should have.

How gangster is that during a war still around the election?

It's extraordinary.

I mean, Lincoln believed in democratic values.

He also believed he would win, but he knew it was not guaranteed.

And it's interesting for people who don't know this, the reason we have mail-in balloting in the US is because of that.

So almost what, I think it's almost a million Union voters are away from their homes.

And so how do they vote?

As soldiers, as nurses, they vote by mail.

The post office delivers their ballots.

That's why we have mail-in balloting.

What about the other counterfactual question of what would have happened if Confederate states won the war?

The Confederate states had won the war.

You would have seen, I think, a separate country in the South, you would have seen two countries.

And that Confederate country would have been a smaller country, but it probably would have been able to defend itself because it would have actually gotten much richer than it was.

It was poor at the time, but through its cotton trade and other things, it would have been

recognized by Great Britain, by France, by other societies.

And you would have seen a Southern Republic.

I don't think you would have seen that Southern Republic dominate the continent.

The Union had the men and people and had the resources, but you would have seen a rival republic to the United States in the South.

Do you think they had interest to dominate the continent, to take over the Union?

They had a foreign policy.

They had a plan.

Many have written about this.

They had plans, many Southerners did, of expanding into the Caribbean, which was actually more feasible.

They did not have the personnel to occupy so much territory going out west, if you think about the amount of land that had to be covered.

But they had the nautical capabilities and naval power and the money to dominate islands in the Caribbean.

And those islands were important for their trade.

So there were many Southerners who wanted to take control of Cuba, wanted to take control of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

So you probably would have seen Southern warfare in those areas.

From a counterfactual history perspective, can you make the case that secession would have been created a better world?

Like if we're sitting today and do back to the future thing, the secession in this context, if we put aside the suffering and the loss of life in the war, that we would be in a better world today, just looking at the political climate.

And can you also make the case that actually this outcome of the Union winning the war is the better one?

I think the Union victory is by far the better outcome, because I think what you would have had otherwise is you would have had a slave republic in the South that would have encouraged slavery in other parts of the world, would have exported slavery, and would have necessarily been hostile to many of the positive changes that occur in the Union, the movement toward progressive reforms, creating cities with health codes and public education.

And many of those things, public education really develops in the North as a way of training workers who are being paid to be better workers in a factory.

There's a reason you don't educate slaves, because if you educate slaves, they'll rebel.

Yeah.

So don't you think there'll be a huge pressure from the North to abolish slavery anyway?

There would have, but I think the South could have survived without another war.

I mean, I think the way that slavery would have ended in the South, if it didn't end with the Civil War, it would have been with another war.

I guess the deeper question is, is it better to work through your problems together, or is it better to get a divorce?

I think in this case, it was better to work through the problems, not even working through them together.

It's better to work through the problems where one side has the resources to incentivize



you to work through the problems rather than leaving you on your own to go your own direction. I think the argument against the Union winning would be the argument that would be made by those who believe they suffered from Union power later on.

So you could argue, if you're a historian of Native Americans, if you're a historian of the Philippines, you could argue some of the areas where this newly united nation coming out of the Civil War was able to use its power to spread its influence.

It would have been harder for the Union to do that if the Union had to deal with a rival to the South.

So as a historian, the Union won.

To which degree are the people from the Union, there is now the United States, the writers of the history, that color, the perspective of who's the good guys and the bad guys?

So this is such an interesting question because...

I like how you take every question I ask and make it into a better question.

That's a deep...

I deeply appreciate it.

I'll ask...

Every time I ask some ridiculous question, you go, that's really interesting.

No, because they're really good questions.

They're thoughtful questions.

So actually the best questions are not the simple ones.

So the axiom is that the winners write history.

And that's usually the case.

Most of the history I learned about Ukraine when I was growing up was written by Russians. It was Russian history of Ukraine.

Most of the history of Europe has been written by Germans and French and British citizens.

So usually it's that way.

And for the most part, our history has been written from a sort of Northeastern point of view.

But it's very interesting.

The history of the years after the Civil War that I focus on in this book has largely been written by the losers.

Because the Union and its legacies, and I grew up in New York, so I'm growing up as a legacy of that, right?

Those were individuals who wanted to write about what happened long after the Civil War when the North got rich.

All those beautiful buildings in New York, all that wealth in New York, it's 1880s, 90s, late 19th centuries, the Gilded Age.

And that's what Northerners want to write about, right?

Because there's glory there.

The 20 years or so after the Civil War, the years that really count, 1865 to 1880 or so, those years are ugly.

It's messy.

And so who wrote about them?

Southerners wrote about them.

And they wrote a story that was about Northern carpetbaggers and corrupt African Americans. And this is the story that Americans learned until a few years ago. I've gone around the country talking about this book, and the number of people have told me they never learned this basic history, because they grew up in Chicago, not because they grew up in Texas, because they grew up in Chicago. And the story they were told the Civil War ended, oh, now let's talk about the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, and how Chicago is coming of age as this great city. We don't like to write history in our country that's not about glory. I'm all for the greatness of our country, but you become great by studying your failures as well as your successes. And that's a real problem we have. And I would love to see a kind of humility from a history perspective. One of the things that surprised me just coming from the Soviet Union to the United States, as you've, I think, spoken about, is the perspective on World War II, and who was the critical component of winning the war. Obviously, in the Soviet Union, it's a great patriotic war, the Soviet Union's are the ones that suffered, and often actually don't emphasize the suffering, they emphasize the glory that they defeated this huge evil. But then you listen to the United States perspective on this, and it's almost like, I mean, there's several ways of phrasing it, but basically the United States won the war, without the United States it would be impossible to win the war. There were the turning point, there were the, my last, my everything, that song, my first, my last, my everything. So that, and I'm sure I wonder what growing up in, maybe after war in Britain, I wonder if there's history books written there that basically say, and they could also make a pretty strong case, that Britain was central to the turning point. You can really make a strong case that like Churchill and Britain were like the turning point of the war, that they're responsible for some of the first failures, major failures of Hitler from a military strategy perspective. But that's interesting to look at that very recent history from very different perspectives. And it's the same problem with the Civil War. We want to tell the story of the Union winning the war, and then everything is good. And it's not the way it worked. What I'm really trying to get at is when you love your country, you have to study the failures. Because by studying the failures, that's how you improve yourself, and that's where you see where real courage is. It's actually that Lincoln failed for so long that makes him a great president. He lost more battles than he won, but he learned, and he got it right in the end. Same with Ulysses Grant. I don't want generals. I'm just echoing Lincoln here. I don't want generals. I don't want leaders who think they're going to get it right the first time, because they're never going to get it right the first time.

You never get it right the first time in an AI experiment, right?  
It's those who can work through failure, learn from failure.  
And we as a society have to start doing that better.  
We have to not just trumpet the successes.  
Let's talk about where we failed as Republicans, as Democrats, as independents.  
Let's move forward from there.  
In recent years have been a movement of highlighting some of the hypocrisy, highlighting the racism,  
the fact that many of the founding fathers were slave owners, that kind of thing, highlighting from the current ethics of our world, showing that many of the people involved in the war on each side were evil.  
What do you think about that perspective on history?  
I think it's super valuable.  
I think we should expose the gap between ideals and practice, but that doesn't mean we should throw away the great people who are also hypocrites, because everyone I've studied is a hypocrite. I'm a hypocrite.  
I think I'm a pretty good father.  
Luckily, my son isn't even a better mother.  
But the parts of me, I mean, I often find myself telling our children to do things that I didn't do, right?  
But they're smart, and they recognize that, and they learn something from that.  
So let's not cover over the hypocrisy, but let's not throw people away for being hypocritical.  
Here's my view of Thomas Jefferson, which is similar to my view of Abraham Lincoln, right?  
These are incredibly insightful, thoughtful people who added so much to our country.  
But they also created flawed systems.  
And one of, excuse me, Jefferson's flaws was even though he saw all the evils of slavery, he was a terrible farmer, and he could not imagine living the lifestyle he lived without slaves.  
He could never work his way out of that, but that doesn't make the Declaration of Independence less valuable.  
In fact, it makes it more valuable.  
There's more that we can learn from that.  
And to me, on the hypocrisy side, many of the people that participate in cancel culture and these kinds of movements, they call everything as racist and so on.  
Sometimes they're highlighting properly the evils in our current society, but the hypocrisy they have is not realizing if they were placed in Germany in the 40s, if they were placed in the position of being a white Christian during slavery at the founding of this country, they would do the same thing.  
They would do the evils that are not criticizing.  
Most of them, so that it takes a truly heroic human to think outside, to be aware of all the evils going on around you and take action.  
It's easy now on Twitter to call people as racist.  
What's hard is to see the racism when you're living in it and your well-being is funded

by it.

Yep.

I think that's right.

I think to analyze ourselves and look honestly in the mirror is very hard.

I also think I make this point in actually all of my books, the real and it's an Eli Visel point that a lot of the evil in our world is the evil of silence and just looking away.

One form of that on Twitter is just hitting like.

It's a cheap way of pretending you're doing something that's important.

After the Civil War, there's all sorts of bad stuff that happens.

I talk about it a lot.

There always are people there who could stop it.

Most people are not responsible for the bad activities, but most don't do something to stop it.

When I say do something, I mean really do something.

Yeah, really.

It's also to push back and push back.

Silence on Twitter is not what Eli Visel was talking about.

Sometimes silence on Twitter is the courageous action because you wait and think and learn and have patience to truly understand the situation before you take actual action.

Not participate in the outrage crowds on Twitter, the hysteria of cancellation.

What's hard to do is to speak up when everybody else is silent.

That's what's hard to do.

Right.

And to speak up against those who you thought were on your side.

Yes, exactly.

Good luck to those on the left who speak up against the left and the same.

Good luck to those on the right who speak up against the right.

It's a lonely place.

It's a painful place.

That's why walking in the center is tough.

You get attacked by both sides.

Yeah.

It's a wonderful, wonderful journey.

And you know what's interesting to me and what I learned writing this book, every book is a journey.

What I learned in the laboratory of this book, right, was a lot of those figures who do stand up even in their own lifetime, they don't get the accolades they deserve, but they make a difference.

And that's maybe not enough comfort because you want to see benefits in your own lifetime, but I think it really matters.

And many of the figures I talk about, we're not even well known in their time.

So you can make a difference.

You do impart something small in the universe that can grow into something better, and we

shouldn't forget that.

Yeah.

That's why I admire Boxer, the horse.

I will work harder even if he gets sent to the slaughter by the evil pigs.

You're on Orwell today.

I love you.

Recently, I mean, Animal Farm is one of my favorite books.

I've been recently, I've just am rereading 1984 now, it's been politicized, that book in general.

But to me, it's a love story.

It is a love story.

That there's a, like love is the, like, it's a story of an oppressive government, a surveillance state, and the nature of truth being manipulated by wartime, da, da, da, da, da, da, so on.

But the beacon of hope in the human heart that pulls you out, that wakes you up in a world like that is a love of another human being.

It's transcendence.

I totally agree.

My understanding, you would know better than I would, is that it's now a best-selling book in Russia again.

1984?

Yeah, it's actually being downloaded more.

There was a piece on NPR, I heard about this actually.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Well, I hope it's because they're looking for love.

That's what I was just going to say, hopefully not in all the wrong places.

Hey, there's no such thing as the wrong places, but that's, that's my opinion.

I'm the one that showed up naked and drunk to your classroom.

I still surprised that was you.

I was wearing a wig, I'm sorry.

Quick pause.

Can I take a bath?

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

And we're back.

John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln in his diary, as you write in your book, he wrote about Lincoln, our country owed all her troubles to him, and God simply made me the instrument of his punishment.

The country is not what it was.

What was the idea of the country that John Wilkes Booth believed in?

You talked about this country that just constantly being repeated in his writing.

For John Wilkes Booth and many other people who are close to the southern part of the country and the Confederacy, they believe the country should be a democracy for white people, a bounded democracy.

And Booth was horrified, and we have to empathize with it, not sympathize, but recognize how

strange it seemed to him that all of a sudden those who were slaves were now soldiers with guns.

And he was particularly offended when he saw in Washington, DC, a group of African American Union soldiers holding southern prisoners of war.

And the world was turned upside down for him.

Democracy for him, he believed in democracy, but democracy for white people.

And that justified mistreating black people for him.

So, country means white people.

Yeah.

And I don't think it's that different from...

And white Christians.

White Christians, yes.

Yeah.

He was not arguing for Jewish emancipation either.

I don't think that's really different from what we've seen in the 20th century for people who justify ethnic cleansing or genocide.

Let's go to the extreme example of Hitler again that we've talked about before.

His view was actually, he claimed he wanted a democracy for Germany.

He wanted a democracy of the right Germans, and he wanted those who he saw infecting and mongrelizing the society out.

That's in essence what John Wilkes Booth thought.

The scary thing is those kinds of ideas, you can put a pretty face on them.

Like, you don't have to use...

And maybe Hitler didn't until the war started, or even parts of the war, make it so clear that you just want the certain kind of Germans that have made Germany a great nation to be the people that are running that nation, and other people who are not truly interested in the...

Don't hold the interests of the country at heart.

They should go elsewhere where they can flourish also, which is wonderful.

But the good Germans, they've built all these amazing things, we should give them the power and not to the others, and you can put a bunch of flowery language around that.

Precisely.

It's the argument that's made all the time today against immigration, that the wrong people are coming into our society.

It's ironic, because it's often made by those who themselves are immigrants, and history teaches us that those who have arrived as immigrants are no more likely to like those who come.

In fact, they might be against the next group for just this reason, because they think they're the right group.

Can you describe to me if it's useful at all to know the difference, if there's a difference between white nationalism, white supremacy, and Christian nationalism?

Is there an intersection between them?

I've heard these terms used, oh, separatism too, right?

Is there an interesting distinction that permeated that history that's still last today?

I think there's a long history in the United States of a belief in white supremacy, and it's not unique to the United States.

We actually inherit this from Europe.

White supremacy is the belief that, for whatever reason, those with lighter color skin, usually of Northern European extraction, are superior, have more rights, are the better people to make decisions, all sorts of things.

It's an aesthetic judgment as much as it is a political judgment, and that gets embedded in our society.

We inherit that.

Christian nationalism is the presumption that it's not just your race, but now it's also your Christian belief, and that is actually relatively new.

There are little pieces of that in our history, but many of those who are white supremacists, even those in the Confederacy, are not Christian nationalists, because they don't agree on which kind of Christianity, and they don't view those who are from a different denomination of Christianity as being good Christians.

There isn't this Big Tenth Christianity in the 19th century.

This notion that there is one Christian nation and that we're all part of it, that's actually really a 20th century creation.

It precedes the evangelical movement, but it's been made even more popular.

But it would not make sense to a confederate to say we're a white Christian nation.

It would make sense to say we're a white Protestant nation, because they didn't consider Catholics good Christians or a white Presbyterian nation.

That's something new, and I think what's particularly dangerous about this notion of Christian nationalism is it creates this false history, saying we've always been together as Christians.

That's always how we've denied, defined ourselves, and that's not accurate.

So one interesting thing, so I recently talked to a left-leaning or maybe a far-left political streamer named Destiny, Stephen Bonnell, I don't know if you're familiar with him.

He does live streaming debates with people.

It's very passionate.

Oh, I've heard of this.

My students have told me.

I've not actually seen it.

My students are always up on the most hip things.

Yes, that is...

No, no, the funny thing about him, he's already considered like a boomer.

He's already the old streamer, because he's been doing it for 10 years.

Oh my gosh.

Who cares anymore?

Anyway, he goes into some difficult political territory, and he actually had a many conversation with Nick Fuentes.

And he says, I mean, some of it is humor, but some of it is pretty dark, hard-hitting sort of criticism.

He says that anyone who claims to be a Christian nationalist asks them if they would rather

have a million people who are atheists from Sweden who are white come, or if you would rather have a million people from Africa who are Christian come.

And the truth comes out that this is a very surface level, this kind of idea of Christian nationalism is still underneath it is a deep racism, like hatred towards black people.

I think that's...

I'm sure that's right.

I'm sure that's right.

What I got into is does not seem to have deep kind of historical context to it.

It's just a different, a rebranding of the old kind of hate.

What I think is important though in drawing this distinction, and why it really matters beyond the history of it, is someone like Lincoln quotes scripture all the time.

The second inaugural is filled, second inaugural address, Gettysburg address, filled with biblical references.

But he does it in a way that's not Christian nationalist, because he's using the text to bring people together.

He's using it as a fable of humanity.

And you could say he's not open to Islamic thinking, he's ignorant of the Islamic world.

But as a Jew, I'm a Jew, reading and studying Lincoln, I know he's a Christian, but I don't feel excluded from his rhetoric.

Because I share that Bible, we have different views, but I don't feel excluded.

It actually brings people together.

The Christian nationalist approach that we've seen in the 20th century, and especially in recent decades, is intended to divide people.

It excludes Jews.

It excludes Christians who don't interpret Christianity their way.

And to say that's what we've always done is an entire distortion of our country.

And it also hides why this is so dangerous.

Insofar as Christianity matters to our country, it should be in the way Lincoln uses it as a set of common texts that many of us resonate with, knowing that we have different rituals and different understandings, not as a way to exclude people and not as a cover for racism, which is what it is.

It's kind of interesting that you could talk about, I've talked to a lot of people, Muslim folks, Jewish folks, Christian folks, there's a way to talk about religion that's inclusive and then that's exclusive.

I mean, it's just been, I've been listening to a lot of these interfaith conversations, and they're awesome.

They celebrate the beauty of each religion.

They banter and argue with each other about details and so on.

But it feels like love, it feels like anybody from any of those religions would feel welcome at that party.

Yeah.

And I think that's possible.

Can you tell me about the disputed election of 1876?

So this is fascinating.



The 1876 election is one of many elections.

We've had some recently that are intensely controversial.

And they're controversial because they're so close.

They're controversial because it's not always clear who's won.

In 1876, Samuel Tilden, the governor of New York, who's running as the Democratic candidate, wins more votes across the country.

So everyone knows he becomes president, right?

Wrong.

He doesn't become president because in three states, South Carolina, Louisiana and Florida, it's very, very close.

And even though Tilden has more total votes, if he loses those states, the electors in those states, all of which go to the winner of the state, would actually make Rutherford B. Hayes, the Republican candidate president.

In all three of those states, you also have Republican governors who have just lost, but are still the people who have to certify the election.

All three states say that Hayes won, even though it's very close and disputed.

So Hayes has one more electoral vote.

Of course, the Democrats won't accept that.

And so we go into February.

The inauguration was done in March, not in January.

We go from November to February without clear agreement on who the president is.

In the end, there's an agreement that they come to a deal, which is where the Democrats will accept Hayes as president in return for Hayes doing all the things the Democrats want in the South.

And so in essence, you have a deal made that one side will get all it wants while allowing the other side to have the figurehead.

And so in a certain way, this marks a moment when the Confederacy wins.

For example, Hayes has to agree to pull out all federal force from the South, which means there's no protection for fair elections going forward.

And you'll see in states like Mississippi, the number of African-American voters will decline and not recover again until the late 20th century.

So that's what that election does.

And from 1876 until 1896, we have a series of elections that are very close.

That happens also in 1888, that the person with the most popular vote loses.

That's Grover Cleveland, who loses to Benjamin Harrison.

And again, we'll have the same issue where there's a dispute.

And so what that election shows us, 1876, 1888, is that our election system and the problem of having an electoral college really complicates things and makes it harder for us to come to any kind of consensus, any kind of agreement on who's won an election.

That's really important for today, because most of the 20th century, we don't have close elections, so it doesn't matter.

When we come to a world today where our elections are very close, our system is not well designed to deal with those issues.

Do you draw any parallels with our time and what are some key differences?

There's been contested elections, Florida, Florida, Florida, with Al Gore, and there's been just contested election after contested election.

And of course, most famously recently with the contested election that led to January 6th.

So I think a couple of parallels and a couple of differences.

One parallel is that when you have close elections, the losing side is never happy.

It's a myth that when you have a close election, the other side just accepts it, and it's not.

That doesn't happen.

And we need to be attentive to that and ready for that.

January 6th actually should surprise us, not because it happened, but because it hadn't happened before.

People who lose a close election are never happy, and they always think that something has been done.

That's one parallel.

Second parallel is elections are violent.

We have this myth that our elections are peaceful.

No, there's always violence involved in one way or another.

Violence in either trying to prevent people from voting or violence in preventing people from preventing people from voting, right?

Elections are not peaceful walks in the park.

And that's why most countries have a centralized system to manage elections and provide protection for people.

We need to think about that.

A lot of people don't vote because they're afraid, they don't want to take the time, but they're also afraid that they're going to anger someone or that they're going to be seen as politicizing an issue.

Differences.

In 1876, there was fraud in the election.

There were people who voted two, three times.

One of the things that Klu Klux Klan did is it prevented black people from voting and that it helped white people go to multiple voting booths.

And this was quite common.

In the 1880s, if you went to vote, here's how it would happen in a place like Chicago and New York, the union boss from your factory would come and get you at the factory, give you lunch, get you drunk, and then drive you from one voting booth to another and give you a ballot that you would bring in and just, and he would watch you deposit that ballot.

Sounds pretty nice.

Not going to lie.

I take that right.

So that's a difference.

That is not how our elections work now.

One of our great accomplishments has been to eliminate virtually all the fraud in our elections.

How have we done that?

By creating safeguards.

It is very difficult.

All the evidence we have is that the minimal fraud that's occurred in elections are onesies and twosies and it's never, in the last 20 years, had any big difference in the outcome of elections.

So that's a big difference.

And then another big difference, I think, is that in that time, the Democrats and Republicans are on the opposite sides of where they are now and that changes everything.

So the Democrats then are the party of the Confederacy, the Democrats are the party of exclusion, the Republicans are more the party of economic expansion, and the Republicans are the big 10 party.

We're reversed today.

Do you think because there's much less election fraud now, like you described, one of the lessons we want to maybe learn from that is there doesn't actually have to be election fraud for either side to claim there's election fraud.

It seems like it's more and more common and it seems to me that in 2024 election in the United States, if a Republican wins, there would also be just maybe just as likely as if a Democrat wins that there would be nuanced claims of election fraud because it's become more and more normalized.

I think what this history shows is that our election system makes it easy for people to claim fraud because it's so unnecessarily complex.

First of all, we don't have a system where the person who gets the most votes is necessarily the winner.

So that already creates one problem.

Second problem is everything I talk about this in the book is controlled at the county level.

So what happens with Hayes and Tilden in 1876 is you have one county official who says they think one person won, another county official thinks says the other person won, there's no centralized system.

It would be as if we allowed every airport to control safety in airplanes, our airplanes would not be safe, our airplanes are safe because the FAA and the National Transportation Safety Board have strict universal guidelines for what makes for a safe plane and therefore our planes generally don't fall out of the sky.

Our system is very complex.

It has complex rules and has too many people who have authority in too many different places. Everybody makes it easier for someone to make an argument that the wrong thing has been done.

We should simplify the system.

In Brazil, they had a very close election and it's very hard for Bolsonaro who lost that close election to claim there was fraud because there's a central authority run by the judiciary that counted the votes and it's just simple.

It's not about which states, it's not about who the county officials were.

Did he claim or no?

He has not acknowledged that he lost.

So to push back on your statement, I'm undefeated monopoly and risk because any time I lose, I walk away claiming there was fraud and cheating involved and I refuse to believe otherwise. I just think that accusations of fraud is a narrative that's disjoint from the reality of whether there was enough fraud.

Yeah, I agree, but I think we make it a little easier for that narrative by having a complex convoluted system.

And I wonder if there's other improvements that take us into the 21st century that allow for electronic voting.

There's all kinds of improvements that seems our system is dragging their feet on, rank chairs, voting, all that kind of stuff.

Let's make this clear.

We claim to be the greatest 21st century democracy and we still vote like the 19th century.

We're not even in the 20th century.

Most people when they went to vote, they actually checked a box and put a piece of paper in a box.

I mean, that's not 21st century.

We can move millions of dollars, maybe billions for you, Lex, in a bank accounts from our keyboard.

Thank you.

From our keyboards.

Billions of rubles.

Billions of pennies.

Pennies.

Why can we move money safely and not vote in the same way?

Yeah.

And at the same time, so there's security there in the movement of money and then there's the actual engagement.

Most of us, depending on your age demographic, click like on Facebook or Twitter or TikTok.

Tens of thousands of times a year.

I think this kind of mechanism constantly, and alike is a vote.

So you're constantly voting, voting, voting, voting.

We love voting.

We love giving our opinion on stuff.

It just seems obvious that gamifying the system, which is essentially what the election is, making it fun to be engaged in different issues.

And there's also be a case, now I don't understand these things deeply, but it always seemed to me that issue-based voting should be the future.

It seems like too complicated to vote for singular people versus on ideas, which on Twitter, we don't necessarily vote for people.

We vote for ideas.

If you like it, tweet or not, you like it and so on.

That too seems to be a possibility for improvement.

Well, there's certainly a way to improve polling.

We could measure public opinion better.

We still poll as if we're in the early 20th century.

They still actually call people.

It's amazing to me.

I was talking to one pollster, they will call 100 people and get one person, but they still do that.

Probably still call landlines, right?

Yeah.

Well, they try to get cell phones too, but they do call landlines.

But one could create a system that would be far better in the way you're describing it seems to me, Lex, to actually assess what people like and don't like.

So your book, your work in general, your perspective on history is, I would say, at least from my perspective, nonpartisan.

Thank you.

Yeah, you do exceptionally good job with that, despite the attacks and the criticisms.

That said, you personally, just the way you speak, my judgment, and you can push back on this, I think you lean left in your politics on the political spectrum.

Maybe you can push back on that.

Can you make the case for either perspective on your own personality as a fan of yours that you do lean left or you don't lean left?

I think it depends on the kinds of issues we're talking about.

But I do tend to lean left on the social and cultural issues.

So I'm a believer, a firm believer.

I didn't believe this when I was younger.

I've come to believe that people should choose their own lifestyle and that we should get out of the way.

I'm a believer, deep believer, as a father of a 20-year-old woman that my 20-year-old daughter should have the right to make any choice she wants with her body.

And if she were to get pregnant at a fraternity party at college, she should have the right to decide whether to have a child or not.

So on those issues, that would code me left of center.

I'm actually reasonably conservative on fiscal issues.

I don't think we should spend money we don't have.

I've long been skeptical of cryptocurrency and things like that.

I know some of your listeners will disagree with me.

And this part is part of my own ignorance of cryptocurrency.

But I'm conservative, lower KC in the way I think about fiscal issues.

I worry about debt.

I'm a believer that there are certain areas where the federal government should play a more of a role.

And there are other areas where things should be left to the localities.

And so sometimes that can code me one way or another.

But I think I sound sometimes a little more left of center because on the social issues

I definitely.

Well, that because there's other explanations not to be grilling you too hard.

No, it's fair.

Because you're also an exceptionally respected and successful professor in the university system where sometimes there is a lean towards the left.

And the other aspect is, I think your viewpoints on Trump where you're a strong critic of Donald Trump.

Yes.

And I guess the question I want to ask is you as a historian, does that color your perspective of history?

Can you, do you ever catch yourself where maybe your criticism of Donald Trump might affect how you see the civil war?

Like as you were completely diving in and looking at the civil war, are you able to put aside your sort of the current day political viewpoints?

No, I'm not.

I think we have to be honest that none of us are objective.

We strive to be nonpartisan.

I really liked when you said that because I think it's an aspiration.

No one is objective.

We all have our biases.

Some people like chocolate, some like vanilla.

And that's just the reality, right?

And as far as I know, it's very hard even to biologically explain that.

And so my view is that what a good historian, what a good scholar does, I don't care what the field is, is your self-conscious of your biases.

And you try to recognize them as you're doing your research and you make doubly certain that where your research seems to reinforce your biases, that you actually have the evidence to make that argument.

But I still believe even doing that, that someone with a slightly different perspective might read the same evidence in different ways.

That's what makes history vibrant.

So I wrote this book in part, as I say in the introduction, because I was self-critical watching Trump and the things I quite frankly find deeply dangerous about Donald Trump and about what happened on January 6th.

And I found I had not thought deeply enough about the roots of that in our society because I don't believe Trump or any one figure creates these kinds of movements.

They come out of a deeper history.

Just a small side tangent, I do believe your work is nonpartisan, but it's also funny that there are a lot of people on the right that would read your work and say that you are partisan.

And I think the reason that can happen sometimes, not strongly though, I think you do a really good job, is the use of certain words also.

I try to be cognizant of that, I try not to use words that trigger people's tribalism.

It's kind of interesting.

So you have to be also aware of that maybe when you're writing history, when you're writing in general, is if you're interested in remaining, you can put on different hats.

You can be carefree in just stating your opinion of criticizing Donald Trump or Joe Biden, or you can be nonpartisan deliberately.

And that takes skill probably and avoiding certain triggering words.

And to me, it's about choosing your battles.

So I try to write because I want everyone to read and I actually think people on the left and right have a lot to learn from this history.

So many people have said to me around the country, this is history I wish I had known before.

But there are moments when I use words that I know are controversial because I'm trying to show there's a fact base behind them.

So white supremacy does exist.

I've had people say, I think that's a politically correct term or it's a woke term.

It can be used in the wrong ways.

One should not go around calling everything one doesn't like that.

But the Confederates were white supremacists.

And I use that word because I think it's an accurate descriptor and we need to recognize that that is a part of our history.

But that does trigger some people.

Because that language is used to mean other things currently.

So the press will take on certain terms like white supremacists and label everybody white supremacist like a lot of people that basically are in the right or something like that.

They use this outraged language and that actually ruins the ability to use the language precisely Exactly.

For historical context.

That's exactly right.

That's exactly right.

But you do have to, unfortunately, we do have to, no, actually people disagree.

You might disagree with this.

But I tend to try to avoid, like take on the responsibility of avoiding that language.

If the press is using a certain kind of language, I try to avoid it.

Yeah.

What I try to do is sometimes avoid it, but where I think the language is necessary to be precise, but also to contextualize.

So I don't call all Confederates white supremacists.

But I point out where white supremacist ideas have influenced them.

And I point out where certain individuals are doing things that resonate with that.

But I'm against these kind of blanket labels and categories.

And you also have to speak about white supremacy in that context in a nuanced way.

So people use white supremacists without thinking what that means.

And they just use it as a slower word like this evil person.

But white supremacist is also just an ideology that a lot of people have believed throughout supremacy, whatever, white, black supremacy, whatever supremacy, believing that some people are better than others, some group is better than another.

And there's been nations built around these kinds of ideas.

And a lot of human history is built around those ideas.  
It's not just evil people believe in this.  
We in the United States of America believe this kind of ideology is not productive.  
It's unethical.  
But those ideas have been held by a lot of people and not like fringe groups.  
But majorities of nations.  
I'd say the same about anti-Semitism.  
And there are many people who are not anti-Semites, but don't recognize that they're carrying around or promoting anti-Semitic ideas or anti-Semitic myths.  
It's a thought that's been held by a lot of people and you need to be convinced out of it that requires conversation and being empathetic.  
It's not just calling somebody anti-Semite and you're evil because if you've ever said something that's kind of a dog whistle against Jewish people, you have to be open hearted to that.  
These are ideas that you have to contend with that you have to ultimately, I think, heal the division behind those ideas by having empathetic conversations with people as opposed to, again, throwing poop.  
I just like saying poop.  
All right.  
Ooh, I got a challenge for you.  
One thing that you have been an outspoken critic of Donald Trump, can you say one thing you like and one thing you don't like about Donald Trump?  
And perhaps can you do the same for our current president, Joe Biden?  
One thing you like and one thing you dislike.  
So it's harder for me to do the one thing I dislike because there's so many things I dislike.  
But the one thing I like about Donald Trump, he believes that America should be a better country.  
I disagree on what he thinks it should be, but he's not a declineist.  
He's someone who believes the world could be made better.  
I disagree with what he's trying to do.  
I disagree with how he's trying to do it, but I like the fact that he thinks it can be better.  
His whole argument for himself is that he can make things better.  
I don't think he can, but I think things can be made better.  
So I like the second half of that sentence when he says, I can make things better.  
Take the eye out.  
I like the can be better because there are too many people on the left and the right who think that, you know, that we can't make things better.  
We have to accept them as they are or they're getting worse.  
I think a world without hope is horrible.  
And I think what he has offered his followers is a kind of hope.  
So underneath his message is a kind of optimism for the future of this nation.  
Yeah.



It's a narcissistic optimism, but it's still an optimism.

Yes.

That he's promising that if you elect him again, he will make things better.

And I think people need to be told and we need to believe that we can make things better.

So that part I accept and I reject those who say, we can't make things better.

My whole historical career is about showing that history gives us tools to make things better.

So I like the idea of trying to make things better and giving people hope and reason to believe that things can be better.

What's the main thing you dislike about Donald Trump?

I think he has no concern or care for the welfare of anyone other than himself.

So, I mean, in a basic human psychology perspective.

And I think he doesn't even care about his children.

I think he's just, I think it's him.

I think he's gone into a rabbit hole.

He might not always have been this way.

I did watch him a long time in New York City when I was growing up in New York.

And I think he's been in this path.

And I think it's an extreme, it's a clinical kind of narcissism.

So to you, when you analyze presidents and you've written about presidents, you don't just look at policies and so on.

You look at the human being.

Of course you have to.

Leadership is about human being.

Policy matters.

It's one part of the equation, but it's not the only part.

What about Joe Biden?

What do you like and what do you dislike about?

You know, what I like about Joe Biden is, in contrast to Trump, I think Joe Biden really, right now in his career, sees his role as the shepherd of democracy.

He really believes that it's his role as president to make our democracy more stable and more vibrant.

I think he really believes, I think that's why he's doing what he's doing right now.

And he comes from that system, the political system that basically the process of democracy has worked there for many decades.

It's all he's done.

That's all he knows, and he wants that to propagate for better and for worse.

And he's not an extreme democratic partisan at all.

He's actually a pretty middle of the road guy on most issues.

Some people don't like him for that.

But I think he is about democracy.

What do I dislike about Biden?

I think he does not have the capacity right now to provide the language and the public discussion of where our country should go.

He doesn't have a language to inspire and build enthusiasm for the future. That would probably be one of my, I mean, because I'm a sucker for great speeches. And so for me, that's definitely a thing that stands out for several reasons. One in a time, because we've been facing so many challenges like the pandemic, it just seems like a, like to me, it seems like an easy like layout. There's so many troubles we're going through that just require a great unifying president with a great, like just if I were to speak candidly about kind of the speaking ability of Obama, for example, Obama would just destroy this right now, both on the war in Ukraine, on the pandemic, all of it, the unifying, there's a hunger for unification. I believe maybe people disagree with that because they've, I think people have become cynical and that the divisions that we're experiencing are kind of already really baked in. They're really, they're really planted their feet. But I don't think so. I think there's a huge hunger, maybe a little bit of a quiet hunger for a unifier, for a great unifier. I agree. I agree. And I think what's, what a great speech does is it's like a great piece of music or poetry. It helps you see something in yourself and feel something you didn't feel before. It doesn't overcome all different, I don't think that speeches are unifying, but I think what they are is they're mobilizing. And you can mobilize people to the same mission with different points of view. Do you think Trump derangement syndrome is a medical condition? Also is there such a thing as Biden derangement syndrome? What I mean by that, it's a funny kind of question. But why are people so deeply outraged, seemingly beyond reason, at their hatred or support for Donald Trump, but hatred in particular? I've seen a lot of friends and people I respect lose their mind completely. So I'm not sure it's a medical condition or not because I'm not a medical doctor. So my kids say I'm the wrong kind of doctor. I'm a doctor, so let me take you from here. No. The fact that you get the doctor sign after getting a PhD is a ridiculous hilarity to me. Hilarious, ridiculous. As the wrong kind of doctor, I'll say I'm not going to comment on whether it's a medical condition, but I do think you're onto something. I think there is a way in which these men become touchstones of anger. And there's all kinds of anger and anxiety that people have. And I've seen this in other historical periods. You center it on one person. In a way, that's John Wilkes Booth and Lincoln. He actually didn't have a personal beef with Lincoln.

It was that all the things he feared were manifest in that.

And I think that's an old story, and then it's made worse by social media in the way we're bombarded.

And it's like, it becomes a drug.

I mean, there are people I know who hate Trump or Biden so much and just watch them.

It's not that they don't watch them, it's that they do watch them, right?

And it's just sort of, and it triggers you and you get hateful.

And then you feel like you've done something by shouting out your hate or typing in.

And so I don't know if it's a derangement syndrome.

I think it's a way in which our energy gets channeled and expressed in totally useless ways.

Yeah.

That's an interesting psychology, which reminds me, I need to explore that because I've noticed that, believe it or not, it's easy for me to believe, but there's people watching this right now who really hate me, and they're watching because they hate me.

They hate the way I look, the way I speak, the mumbling, all of that.

And they're still watching.

And I'd like to say that, as I nervously try to explain myself, I'd like to say that that's not a productive way.

I get it.

I understand.

There's a kind of, because I, what is it?

Is it the same psychological effect when you see a car crash and you keep staring?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

It's something that pulls you in.

Totally.

I feel like it's that feeling, it's probably slightly different, but you kind of want to, you want to maybe feel something and there's an anger in you already, frustrations from day to day life.

Life is hard, and you just want to channel that anger towards something, but I just, the internet really makes that easy for some reason.

And it makes sense of your life.

That's the problem.

It, for people whose lives are chaos, hating you and blaming you gives order to their lives.

Yeah.

If it makes you happy, please continue.

Wow, I'm curious, does it, it seems to bother you though, doesn't it?

Yeah, hate of any kind, not towards me, just the people, because I think about them and I tend to think that most people are amazing human beings and have a capacity to do great things in this world.

And so I just think that's not a productive way of being.

Like psychologically for anything whatsoever, everybody has quirks that you can hate, but you just focus on the really positive stuff and you celebrate that stuff and that feels good.

That has a momentum to it.

I guess the hate has a momentum to it too, and that's what I'm trying to highlight.

If you follow the momentum of hate, that's going to maybe feel good in the short term, but it's not, it's going to fuck you over more and more in your life.

And that's, you have to be cognizant of that as you interact with the internet.

I agree with everything you said, but I think people who do things that are influential and serious, there always are some people who hate them.

I suppose that, but I wanted to show the difference between philosophical disagreement that borders on hate and like what's called like hate watching, where you just, which is what I would say TDS is, which is you're almost enjoying how much you hate this person, you're just sitting in their hate and you forgot, you lose all reason, you lose everything, your capacity to think as an individual to empathize with others, you lose all of that. You're in this muck of hate and you, and somehow it helps you make sense of this particular difficult moment in your life, but otherwise it just, it seems like a shitty way to live.

But disagreement definitely, I like disagreement.

But I guess what I'm saying is, and I think this is your message too, right, is that don't let the fact that people don't like you or even that some people hate you stop you from doing the right thing.

Think about how you can perhaps trigger them less, but don't stop what you're doing.

I see too many, and this is why I bring this up, too many of my students, too many young, very talented people who are afraid to take risks because they're afraid that someone will hate them and that can't get in your way.

The reality is most people, or there will always be at least one person that will have you back and that will support you and just focus on them as long as you're doing the right thing, focus on them for the strength.

But in general, I'm exaggerating here because most of the time 99% of people are supportive on the internet.

It's just that something about the human psychology really stands out to you when somebody criticizes.

Well, it's easy on the internet.

This is historically different from where we were before in a society.

It's very easy now to say hurtful things to people and not have to even deal with them looking at you in the face.

One of the things that encourages politeness is the fact that we're looking at one another. And we are naturally programmed not to want the other person to react to us in certain ways, but when we don't see their face, it's very easy to say all kinds of things.

Let me actually comment on that point.

There's a lot of people on the internet that say that I don't push back on points or criticize people or ask the hard questions enough.

First of all, oftentimes I disagree with that assessment, but also I don't think you guys realize how hard that is to do when you're sitting with a person.

I don't care about access.

I don't care about them being famous just in a basic human level.

It's really hard to ask a hard question from a place of empathy.

Except when I'm sitting here.

You seem to be only asking me hard.

No, this is a super fun.

I mean, when there's brilliant people like you, there's nothing to push back on.

That's easy.

But there's a basic human thing that doesn't...

I think it's almost easier to be a journalist.

Like journalists do this well where they don't have empathy for the person.

They're just asking the hard questions.

So where were you at this time last night?

Because that's very suspicious, it's in contradiction to what you said.

And they're just doing factual stuff.

If you actually truly have a conversation with another human being you empathize, it's very difficult.

Because they have a story.

They have a vision of themselves that they're the good person.

And to call somebody a liar while having empathy basically imply that they're a liar that's damn, damn hard.

So anyway, I'm trying to figure this thing out.

Can you make the case that the January 6th storming of the US Capitol is a big deal?

And can you make the case that it is not a big deal?

I think the case is overwhelming that it was a big deal.

And I opened the book with this before going back to the end of the Civil War because I think it echoes that moment.

You had a group of people who literally tried to stop the peaceful transfer of power and were intending, and there's overwhelming evidence of this, if they had caught the vice president or the speaker of the house to do bodily harm to them or to kidnap them.

So this was a coup d'etat.

That is the definition of a coup d'etat when you try to capture and prevent elected officials from doing their job.

That's a huge deal.

That had happened before in our country in states.

And I talk about this in Louisiana, in Tennessee, in places like that after the Civil War.

But it never happened in the Capitol.

It's a huge deal.

That is, if I might say, that's what we would think of as third world behavior in our society and no offense to those from other parts of the world.

I'm just trying to make a point is how we see that as happening somewhere else, not here.

That's a big fucking deal.

The case that is not a big deal, I guess the case to make there is that they didn't succeed.

The case that is not a big deal is not that their intentions were not bad.

I don't see how you can defend their intentions.

The case that is not a big deal is that they're a bunch of clowns.

And yeah, they broke in.

But in the end, once they got in there, they didn't know what to do, which is true. And so, I think a professional coup plotter would say these were the amateurs and that they had no real chance of succeeding because once they got into the Capitol, they had no plan what to do next.

What were they going to do?

You know, steal stapler from Nancy Pelosi's office.

They didn't seem to have a plan.

And then what ended up happening, they left the building.

Well, that would be the case.

That's not a big deal because their intention was not to overthrow.

Their intention was to protest because if the intention was to overthrow, it would be much more organized.

I think the evidence is pretty overwhelming that they intended to stop.

They were there to stop the certification of the election.

They were there to prevent Donald Trump from having to leave office.

They just didn't have a good plan.

This was the Keystone cops.

So you're saying there is statistically some possibility that this would have succeeded at halting the basic process of democracy.

You could imagine a scenario where it might have if they had gotten lucky.

Sure.

If they had caught the vice president.

Well, what could have, if they caught the vice president-

They couldn't go on and certify then.

He has to be there.

He has to be there.

No, but don't you think that would resolve itself through police action and so on?

My question is how much is this individual hooligans and how much of this is a gigantic movement that's challenging the very fabric of our democracy?

It's not a gigantic movement, but it was a small coup d'etat that could have actually made the transition much more difficult.

Was there a scenario where Donald Trump stayed in office legitimately?

No.

But was there a scenario where they created a great deal of chaos that further undermine our democracy?

Absolutely.

Yes.

Here's how it would happen.

They capture Pence.

They either kidnap him and try to ransom him, or they, which is what they were trying to do with the Michigan governor, Governor Whitmer, or they kill him.

And then Donald Trump says, okay, well, there's no vice president, so you can't certify.

The Senate would choose someone else to be vice president, but Donald Trump says, no, that's not legitimate.

Do you think it's possible that Donald Trump would say something like that?

Absolutely.

I disagree with you.

He said that morning that Pence should not certify.

He said that morning.

But there's a difference between sort of Twitter rhetoric.

No, no, he said it at a rally.

Sure.

A rally rhetoric.

But there is a threshold.

It feels like a big leap.

He asked people around him in the Oval Office how he could make that happen.

He tried to get a new person appointed attorney general who would do that.

He tried to find legal justification for it.

I think the evidence is overwhelming that Trump was supportive of efforts after the election didn't go the way he wanted to keep him in office.

And whether that's legally actionable and whether one thinks that means he's a bad president or not is a matter of opinion, but facts are facts.

Yeah.

I just wonder if it's possible for him to have stayed president in this kind of context.

No.

It seems like a heated, just like you said, elections can't even be violent.

They're heated.

People are very upset.

When Donald Trump won the presidency in 2016, I was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the amount of anger, just the energy I was getting from people, I mean, if there was any way to channel that anger, I think people would be in trouble.

But let's just...

There's anger.

Yeah.

I agree with that.

And that is right.

And elections are violent, as I said.

But this is different.

This is the person in the office of the presidency using the power of the presidency to try to stay in office, to imperil people's lives, to distort our government on a scale we had not seen before.

And these are not opinions of mine.

We have the documentary evidence.

We have the testimony from people about this.

We can differ over what you think of his presidency as a whole.

We can differ over whether you think he should be held legally responsible.

Those are matters of opinion.

But the facts are he sat on January 6th, watched it on TV, did not send ever, ever, did he

ever send any protection for Congress?

That is his job.

And throughout, asked, continued to ask how this could, the certification could be prevented.

To you, that's not incompetence.

That's malevolence.

Absolutely.

If I watch my children getting harmed and I don't do something about it, I'm watching it.

And in fact, I take action that tries to help those who are doing the harm.

You would not just say I'm an incompetent president.

You would, a parent, you would say I was a negligent parent and you'd call parental support to take away my children.

I was troubled by the way the press covered it, that they politicized the crap out of that and not just the press, but also Congress itself, it just seemed like impeachment and all this, it just seemed to be a kind of circus that wasn't interested in democracy or nonpartisanship. So it's very difficult for me to see the situation with clear eyes because it's been colored by the press.

It's very difficult for me to know what is even true.

Members of Congress, including our members of Congress from our district and others, right?

Their lives were threatened.

They were traumatized.

I have a lot of students, at least a dozen who are staff members, more than half for Republicans.

Part of what traumatized them was that the president did not do his job to protect them.

Yes.

As a child would be traumatized, not only if harmed by someone, but if mom and dad don't do everything they can, one of the things that makes people feel safe is they know their parents, they know their person and authority can't always keep them safe, but they want to know the person's always trying.

I agree with you that, listen, I'm somebody that believes in this kind of idea of family, especially people I work with, that to me is a high ideal to protect, but that's a little bit different.

It's his job.

Hold on a second.

That's a little bit different than protecting democracy.

Those are two different things.

Protecting your employees and protecting democracy is an ideal.

You could say he didn't protect either, but I think the criticism that he didn't protect the employees is one thing.

But the employees in this case are the ones carrying out democracy.

So it's like saying the general who doesn't protect his soldiers is maybe not protecting his employees.

Those are not protecting the war effort.



The people we're talking about, the people who are actually doing the work of democracy at that moment, the most basic function of democracy, which is certifying votes and their lives with... I'm telling you, I had students, one who works for Senator Romney, for example, who spent hours in a closet hearing people outside looking on her phone, when is the president sending people to protect us so we can do our job?

And she was not happy with the way the election turned out, but she was there to do her job because she believes in democracy to service the Senate and the Senate's role.

What should have Donald Trump done without turning him into a different human being?

He should have immediately... Just as we were watching things get breached, the moment they had the members of the House and the Senate had to evacuate their respective chambers, he should have immediately gone on TV and Twitter and every space he could and tell his supporters to leave and say what he never said.

This is un-American what you're doing.

This is unacceptable.

He never used those words.

This is un-American.

This is unacceptable.

I'm completely against anyone storming the Capitol like this.

Go home now, please.

Well, you can use his own language, but tell him to leave.

Yeah.

Absolutely. We know he was watching for hours and we have testimony from his own daughter from Ivanka saying she tried time and again to get him to say something earlier on and he didn't.

He watched it.

He can still criticize all the politicians.

He can criticize everyone he wants, but he should have told him to leave.

All he has to do in that moment is basic protecting democracy, protecting the Capitol, leave.

Tell them to leave and do everything he can to find any kind of force he can give to go protect the Capitol.

I wonder how difficult it is to lose a presidential election.

It's happened so many times.

We know.

I understand that, but it's especially when like, what is it, you know, 80 million people vote for you or like some, like millions and millions and millions of people vote for you.

It's crazy.

It's crazy.

This democracy thing is crazy.

George H.W. Bush won a war in the Middle East, right?

He had 90% approval rating and then a year later lost the election.

There's someone, Bill Clinton, he thought had none of the experience he had.

Someone didn't have, he believed didn't have the right moral character and Bush did everything he could to help the next president get started well and they became good friends.

George W. Bush, he didn't love Obama.

That's considered one of the smoothest transition George W. Bush ordered every single person in his administration to do everything they could to help the new administration.

That's what a leader does.

Yeah.

That's one of the things I admire in leaders.

Well, that felt heated.

Speaking of which, can you just linger on how do you think we can heal the divide in this country?

Do you think it's possible?

There feels to be a strong division.

I think we can heal the divide.

I think, as you said, there's so many opportunities with new technology to bring people together just as we're using it to tear them apart.

I have the best job in the world because I get to teach so many students of 300 in my class in the spring and US history class.

What I've found with my students is they're mostly not Democrats or Republicans.

They mostly care about the same things.

Every one of my students seems to care about climate change.

I thought you were going to say TikTok, but okay.

Yeah, we'll take it.

Second to that climate change.

I think they offer a new future for us, and here's what I'll say as a historian.

We go through cycles of division and cycles of less division and less partisanship.

One moment when it seems people agree too much on the mainstream encourages people to go the extremes.

When people see the extremes, they want to come back to the middle, and that is where my students are.

Most of my students want lower inflation.

They agree with Republicans on that, but they want more to be done about climate change.

They're in the middle on these issues, and I think giving them more opportunity.

What's the best way to heal our divisions, honestly?

Get the old men out and the young women and men in.

Because they ultimately don't have that same division deeply baked in.

Not only that, they find it disgusting in the way you and I do.

Yeah, that's true.

What's the right way to have conversations?

Just to stay on that with people on the left and the right.

Yeah, I mean, I don't know how often you practice this.

You care about politics.

How often do you talk to people who voted for Trump or who are Republicans?

It's hard.

I try, but it's hard.

75% of the people I talk to are not those people.

Do you have people who are Trump supporters in your extended family?

Thanksgiving?

No, I don't in my extended family.

Are they no longer in my family?

It's a fashion.

I have taken them out of the photograph.

They do not exist.

Yeah, you just erase.

I do, but I know people, I have friends, yeah, who fall into that, but it's still a minority of my friend group.

So I want to be clear that I'm not as good at this as I should.

But I think we do have to reach out.

But I also, I'm less interested, honestly, in refighting old battles with old dogs.

I'm more interested in finding ways to get a new crop of people educated and involved and engaged without imparting the same partisanship on them.

So I will support, and this I have to, I will support and encourage, especially any student of mine, but any young person who is smart, has good ideas.

I don't care whether, I don't ask whether a Democrat or Republican, and I have given money to some young candidates who are not Democrats.

So that's the way, I think it's a generational change, and I think it's reaching out and trying to get people to see beyond partisan divisions who are in their 20s and teens rather than that.

That's why we do our podcast.

This is Democracy.

Zachary and I do that, my son and I, because we're exactly, you will never hear an episode where we take one side or another.

Our goal is to explain the issue, whether it's the challenges of democracy in China or its climate change or whatever it is, or its memory of war in our society, and to explain the issue and then offer people an optimistic pathway that's neither one side nor the other.

So actually, to push back a little bit on young people, I do see that sort of the exhaustion with the sort of partisanship, but I've also, and this I think is the case throughout history, and I see it now, especially in the teenage years, especially if I'm being asked with boys, there's a desire for extremism in various directions, all kinds of extremism, like just extreme awesomeness or extreme anything, just extreme, and F the man that tries to make me behave, this kind of energy.

And that's why you can take any ideology, basically any extreme ideology starts being exciting, whether you're a Marxist or a communist, you're not just going to be like, for socialized healthcare, you're going to be like, no, no, no, no, no.

Just go full hammer and sickle.

I'm going to wear red, and then the same with white supremacy or just red polymer.

The way you see society, the way you see the world, the extremism is there.

And part of that, it's kind of to steal that perspective, it can be productive, that energy, if it's controlled.

And especially if we have institutions that keep it a little under control, one of the

criticisms I have with a lot of people have, I'm actually much more moderate than that criticism of universities is they give a little too much power to the 18 year old who just showed up with their Marxist like books and so on.

And they want to burn the whole thing down.

That's beautiful.

But the whole process of the universities get different viewpoints, educate more, make that person's viewpoint more sophisticated, complex, nuanced and all that kind of thing.

I think you're right, but I think that's more talk than action.

In my experience, there is, especially among young men, you're absolutely right.

There is a valorization of the tough guy because most men 18 and 19 are still not fully comfortable in their masculinity, however they're going to define it.

And so a way of performing that is being extreme in one way or another.

And I've definitely seen that, but I think it's more often than not rhetoric and actually there's a very strong power of peer pressure and conformity that works on young people.

And the positive side of that now is the peer pressure among them is not to join one party or the other.

It's to say, this is terrible.

Look at how our parents are screwing things up and they're right.

And I think we can lean into that and get a lot of positive creative action out of that.

On universities, you brought this up a few times and I think we have to be careful.

I think you and I agree on this.

It's not that universities are free of bias, but universities, especially large universities, whether it's UT, MIT, Yale, whatever we're talking about, right?

They're large, complex empires.

And most universities, people in the arts tend to be a little left of center, it's self-selection.

Those in engineering tend to be pretty much in the middle.

And those at business schools tend to be right of center.

And so I think we need to be careful not to generalize, you know, at the University of Texas there's as much influence from the business school and the athletic department as there is from the humanities.

So it's not a left-leaning campus.

And that's also true at Yale, you have the School of Management at Yale, you have a huge medical school, right?

People who are very professional and less political on a lot of these issues.

So I think we have to be careful.

I think there's certain pockets of things, but some of that you're never going to avoid, right?

Engineers are always going to be the people who-

Hey, no.

No, no, but I'm sure you're going to- who want to generally find some objective measure and avoid political interpretation, right?

They want to find their objective measure.

I'm surprised how most people in robotics don't seem to- they're afraid of humans.

They run away from humans.

Precisely.

Precisely.

And the arts people are always going to be more touchy-feely, and the business people are always going to like markets.

I mean-

Well, my own personal opinion on this is just me talking, and I don't know if it's grounded in data, but just my own experiences.

It seems a lot of the things that people criticize about universities comes from administrations from the bureaucracies.

The faculty and the students are, even with biases, are really interesting people.

And all of their different- I wouldn't call them biases, but different perspectives add to the conversation.

It's the administrate- too much, of course you need, just like with institutions, you need some, but too much, it becomes too heavy-handed.

And somehow that has been getting a little bit out of hand at a bunch of universities, just too much administration.

And I don't know what the mechanism is to let- to make it more efficient, but that's been always the struggle.

Maybe the public criticism is the very mechanism that makes universities, the administration smaller.

Absolutely.

We have those issues, and you can also say athletics has gotten out of control.

Like you said, you co-host a podcast with your son, Zachary, called This Is Democracy.

What's been- there's a million questions I can ask, but just that pops to memory.

What's been a challenging or maybe an eye-opening conversation you've had on it?

Oh, we've had a lot of eye-opening conversations.

Our most recent episode is an episode on the German right.

As I'm sure many of your listeners know, there was a group called the Reichsberger.

I think they still exist in Germany.

They were actually led by a former German prince, and they had been planning to assassinate the Bundeskanzler, and were organizing all sorts of other efforts.

They do not believe that the current German government is legitimate.

They think the last legitimate government was the Nazi government.

They see the whole post-war period as illegitimate.

So it's the German far-right.

Correct.

And we had on a member of the German Bundestag, of their parliament, who's been involved in the investigations or in the oversight of the investigations, and talking with her about the depth of these issues and the challenges they face in Germany.

It's certainly not a huge part of German society, but it's a significant number of people, probably more than 20,000 people who are part of this.

To me, brought home how much of what we thought was the past is still in the present.

And I think that's a recurring theme in our show, and our show is optimistic.

It's not about woes to the world.

It's actually about taking issues.

We take a topic each week that's in the news.

We go back to understand the history, and we then use that history to make better policy, to talk about how to make better policy today.

And in this case, it was clear that even in Germany, there's a lot of unfinished work in explaining to people and helping those, for instance, in the former East, where a lot of this group has its support, why this government is legitimate, why it operates the way it does, and addressing their concerns.

It was strikingly similar to some of the problems we have in our own society.

Yeah, it's interesting that there's a far-right movement in Germany.

So you look at different parts of the world as well, in the United States.

We do.

We did an episode recently on China, on the effects of zero COVID and the protests in China.

We've done a number of episodes on the war in Ukraine.

Our role each week is to have on either a policymaker, a scholar, or an activist who can help us understand an issue and get beyond partisanship.

So what's been eye-opening are some of the details, but what's also been eye-opening, honestly, is how easy it is to have a nonpartisan conversation.

It's not hard.

We open every episode with a poem that Zachary writes.

He writes an original poem, I'll brag on my son.

He's the youth poet laureate in Austin right now, and he writes a poem on each topic.

What's the style of poetry usually?

Is he dark?

No, he's usually, he's often ironic.

Ironic, like with a bit of humor?

Yes.

Okay.

And he likes word plays.

So he's not like a rebellious, dark teenager that's just...

No.

He's a creative know-it-all.

No words, he would probably disagree.

But what's interesting...

I was like, you're the know-it-all on the podcast.

Oh, no, no.

We do have a lot of followers, and most of them comment on him.

They don't comment on me.

So I'm the junior partner.

You're the yoko-o-no of the partnership, I'm scared.

But what I will say, and this is a really optimistic thing that I deeply believe, if

you frame things properly, you open with a poem, you open with questions, not with partisan positions, even when we have someone on who's a known Republican or Democrat, we can have

a very nonpartisan conversation.

I mean, of course, we get criticisms, but we're almost never criticized for being partisan one way or the other.

It's not hard to do this.

You just have to make an effort to avoid the partisan claptrap that we can all fall into.

Focus on the humanity.

What has your brilliant, popular son, Zachary, taught you about life?

Oh, he's taught me so much in his 18 years, as has our daughter, who's 20.

Two things stand out.

He's taught me that a new generation has so much to offer.

And I don't just mean because he's smart and engaged, as our daughter is, too.

I also mean that you realize when you have a child that even though you're doing the same things with them, they see the world differently and legitimately.

And it reminds us that the world can be seen legitimately in different ways.

And it's not that he and I disagree on major political issues.

It's actually the small stuff that he sees differently.

In the details, you see that you can have very different perspectives.

Exactly.

You have a very different way to draw, to create a painting of the same scene.

And then the other thing he's taught me is, as I said about the poetry, the importance of the arts.

I've always been a lover of the arts, but it had always been in some ways parallel to my historical scholarship.

We need to do a better job of integrating, as the Greeks did.

The artistry, all the things we do, we separate them as disciplines, but they're all deeply connected.

This is what I like about your podcast, honestly, is that you integrate all these things.

You'll have people on with AI, you'll have a guy doing arm wrestling, you have all these things together, right?

And it's that these worlds come together and there's a lot to gain by bringing the arts and the sciences and all this together.

It's an obvious thing to say, but we forget.

Yeah.

And it somehow becomes bigger than the individual parts.

What gives you hope about the future?

You looked at, especially with this book, at just such a divisive part of our history and the claim, the idea that you carry through the book, that that division still permeates our society.

So what gives you hope?

I try to end the book on a very hopeful note because I am hopeful.

I'm hopeful that these divisions were made by people and can be unmade by people.

I do not believe that what I describe in this book, the division, the hate that we see today as well, I don't think it's inevitable.

I think it can be actually corrected quite easily and corrected easily by addressing

the challenges in our institutions, the ways in which this history has been embodied in our institutions, even though we're different.

And through our own recognizing of it, the gift of the last few years, I don't care whether you're a Democrat or Republican, the gift of the last few years is that we've been able to see the horror around us.

And once you see the horror, you can do something about it.

What's dangerous is when the horror is there and you don't see it, it's hidden.

It's been unmasked.

I don't care where you stand.

I've probably spoken in about 25, 30 cities about this book.

Every audience I've asked, how many of you have been shaken by the last four to five years and everyone everywhere has raised their hand?

That's a gift that's consciousness raising.

I grew up in a time in the 1980s when we were concerned everyone was apathetic.

That was what was being said.

We had lower voter turnout than we have now.

People didn't seem to care.

My students, when I was a very young professor in the early 2000s, my students all wanted to go work for banks.

They just wanted to make money.

The best students wanted to go work for Goldman.

We're not in that world anymore.

There's been a consciousness raising.

Knowing there's a problem, naming the problem gives us a chance to fix the problem.

I think that's where we are as a society now.

Young people are excited to solve the problem.

Do you think the individual, if a young person is listening to this, do you think the individual has power in this?

Absolutely.

I think the individual has a huge amount of power now.

There's a demographic reason.

We've got all these old people who have held on too long.

Look at the president, look at the Senate and look at any institution.

They're all, we're reaching a demographic cliff unlike China.

We have a large population that's coming up.

Those who are watching now who are in their 20s, they're going to get to move into leadership positions much faster than their parents did.

Let's go.

Yeah.

That's one.

Then the second thing is just what we're doing here.

Social media, when used properly, gives a platform to young people.

They don't have to go through the New York Times like I do.

This is why I do the podcast with my son.



Find other ways.

You reach millions of people, and this can be done.

You don't need to wait for the old guys to give you the check mark that it's okay.

Just put on a suit, get a haircut, and start speaking nonsense into microphone.

Yeah.

Well, also, I mean, have a very neat place.

That's why I love you.

All right, Jeremy, you're an incredible human being.

Thank you for talking once more time.

Thank you for writing this important book.

I hope you keep writing, and I hope to keep talking to you because you're the shining beacon of political hope I have here in Austin that we get to enjoy.

I want to thank you for having me on, and thank you for your show.

I think what you're doing is so important, and I really deeply respect what you do.

Thanks for listening to this conversation with Jeremy Surrey.

To support this podcast, please check out our sponsors in the description.

And now, let me leave you with some words from Abraham Lincoln.

Nearly all men can stand adversity.

If you want to test the man's character, give him power.

Thanks for listening, and hope to see you next time.