Marshall here, welcome back to The Re-alignment.
I've gotten a lot of feedback from listeners.
You would all be interested in history-focused episodes that obviously hit on the political and policy themes of The Re-alignment, but also just tell interesting and relevant stories.
So here's what we're going to do to offer a bit of signposting.
Every Friday that doesn't feature an Ask Me Anything episode with Sager via our Super Gas subscription, I'm going to do an unpay-walled episode focused on American and global history.
First up, today's episode is with NPR's Steve Drummond on his new book, The Watchdog, how the Truman Committee battled corruption and helped win World War II.
This is a particularly interesting conversation in light of my episode of rep Mike Gallagher earlier this year.
His China Select Committee could take plenty of notes from Truman's efforts before and during World War II.
I'll be expanding my thoughts on the book and this episode in the Re-alignment sub-stack, so be sure to subscribe at the link in the show notes or go to therealignment.substack.com.
And yes, that is a little different from the Supercast website, so be sure to click the proper show note in the podcast player of your choice.
To wrap, it feels cheesy to say, but in light of the disastrous drop in NAP US history and civics test scores amongst eighth graders this past year, it's more important than ever to listen to these sorts of conversations and support the work of authors like Steve.
So you can purchase The Watchdog at our bookshop link in the show notes.
Hope you all enjoy this conversation and definitely let me know what upcoming books or previously written books you'd love to cover on the show along with other areas of history and politics.
See you all next time.
Stephen Drummond, welcome to the Re-alignment.
Hey, good to be here.
Thanks, Marshall.
Yeah, I'm really glad to be here.
I think I've really wanted to do a lot more history facing content that obviously could speak to the present moment.
I think this is actually the perfect book to kick everything off of.
So I gave a bit of an intro so people can really let us dive into things.
What was the Truman Committee?
Sure, in the late 1940s or after World War II broke out in September 1939, two years before the United States would join the war, there was an immediate recognition in some parts of the government, notably Franklin Roosevelt and the Roosevelt administration that the United States very quickly needed to get ready for war.
At that time, the United States Army was ranked in size 17th in the world behind Romania.
So there was a lot of work to be done.
Army camps needed to be built.
The Navy needed modernized airplanes, tanks, trucks, army camps.
All these things needed to be built, and they needed to be built in a hurry.

So the government was on a spending spree, and what the Truman Committee did both before Pearl Harbor and after was take a look at all that money being spent and try and figure out was it being spent wisely, was it being wasted, and by all accounts throughout the course of the war, the Truman Committee saved the country billions of dollars and probably an unknown number of lives on the battlefield.
You know, this is interesting because I'd love to know why you think this is the moment to tell this story.
We're kind of in the middle of a Harry Truman resurgence from a popular recognition perspective, but this is a specific part of Harry Truman's story.
Like why is this the time to tell this story?
I think there's a lot of relevance to today.
We keep seeing time after time, one point five trillion dollar defense bills to recover from the pandemic or to promote this or that initiative.
Every single time one of these giant spending programs comes out, somebody pops up and says, you know what, we need another Truman Committee to look after this.
And so time and again.
And then since 1944, when Truman resigned from the committee, there have been many big congressional investigations.
The Kupfauver Committee in the fifties, the investigation of President Kennedy's assassination, the 2010, the collapse of the financial institutions, even last year, the January 6 committee, many of these committees take many of the same principles as Truman pioneered at that time, trying to be barred partisan, trying to get the fact straight, not seeking headlines or publicity, trying to, trying to do the public service.
And so oftentimes, I think when there are these big congressional investigations, Watergate, I think many of them trace their roots right back to the Truman Committee.
You know, it's interesting you giving that example of every time there is a scandal from the fall of Kabul to the end of the war on terror, at this point, it's just become a cliche to say, we need a new Truman Committee.
Those committees, except from the ones you listed, have just not been a empirically effective to the way you established at the start of the episode, like once again, like saving billions, billions of billions, while also saving lives.
What basically happened over the next 60 years?
And I think the I think the post Vietnam CIA investigations would be an example of an effective use of a committee.
But those seems to be the exceptions.
What made it fundamentally different?
Very much so.
And I just see every day, you know, I'm a journalist who works in Washington, DC, the toxic atmosphere here in Washington that contempt that many people hold the government, the inability of the two parties to work together.
And so here I've spent the last four years in the 1940s, Truman built a small committee with five senators, three Democrats and two Republicans.
And every here's, I think, a key fact.

During Truman's time as chairman, the Truman Committee put out 32 reports.
Every single one of them was unanimous and bipartisan.
The Truman spent a lot of time building consensus, getting the Republican members of the committee on board.
And that, I think, was super effective.
I think it made the trust in the committee.
Here's another way of looking at it.
During the war, there were dozens of congressional investigations into this or that, many of them covering the same ground that the Truman Committee was covering.
Only one was guaranteed front page news.
Only one vaulted its chairman into the White House.
And it was, I think, this hard work to get the fact straight, to be bipartisan, to quietly get a lot of work done without making a big deal out of it.
I think it was very effective.
And I think some of these investigations today, some of the politicians in Washington today could learn a lot from that.
You know, an obvious answer to my question would be the differentiating factor between the Truman Committee and, let's say, investigations moving forward is just the stakes.
It's World War Two.
Obviously, they're going to get it together.
But as you point out at the start of the book, during World War One and the Civil War, you had similarly high.
I mean, obviously, the World War One is as high stakes in the Civil War was, but you see similarly high stakes from a national survival perspective.
Yet you saw ineffective committees, ineffective committees.
In the case of World War One, they're happening after the fact.
They're hyper politicized.
They kind of drag on and on and on.
And then the Civil War Committee, I think, in one of my favorite quotes of all time, Robert E. Lee says, this is from the book, quote, the committee was worth at least two Confederate divisions in terms of how bungling and effective it was.
So why was the pre World War Two version where there are similar stakes ineffective in those two examples?
So so just like I was talking about the committee on the conduct of war during the Civil War was a thorn in Abraham Lincoln's side from the get go.
It was done in a lot of ways and a partisan way to get at Lincoln rather than in a public service way to figure out what is the best way to run the war.
Truman, by the way, was a great student of history.
And he read the entire proceedings of that committee and he learned from it.
One of the things that Truman committee said from the get go, we will not investigate strategy, we will not investigate conduct on the battlefield.
In other words, Truman defined his goal and he stuck to it.

That's one of the things.
And then Truman looked at these committees after World War One.
There were 117 of one of them.
The war ended in 1918.
One of those committees was still in business in 1937.
The money was spent.
Everything was wasted by that time.
Truman's idea was let's look at these expenditures.
Let's look at the spending program while it's happening and let's see what we can do to fix it.
And then time and time again, Truman would pick up the phone and call somebody in the Pentagon or his assistants would or they would and quietly the problem would go away without a lot of fanfare.
And that was something that Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party leadership greatly appreciated is the key story here.
And this is what a good explanation for why committees haven't been particularly effective moving forward.
The fact that Harry Truman and the committee obviously with the Democratic majority were aligned with the executive branch.
Very much so.
And then again, a lot of it I really think has to do with Truman's leadership.
So we can overblow this and say having said that.
I read Robert Carroll's book, The Master of the Senate.
I don't know if you're familiar with it.
Of course.
But he talks about during the during the Vietnam War,
Linda Johnson has the idea to create a new Truman committee.
Taking all the lessons, Truman learned and flipping them on their side.
They wouldn't really deal with substance.
The press releases were more substantive than the actual hearings themselves.
And like a lot of these committees that eventually faded away and frittered away in a part, you know, in sort of, you know, the press and the public kind of rolled their eyes at it.
Truman's committee time and time again would come out and tell American people things they didn't know about what was going on during the war.
Again, a very strange circumstance, given that Truman was a Democratic senator criticizing the administration of his own party.
It's a little unusual.
Yeah, it's really interesting too, because something you said when you were critiquing the Civil War congressional investigations where they did not,
they focused on the conduct of the war.
And I think it's easy to say, well, that makes sense that you would take the lesson from the Truman committee that you don't you don't say, look, we're going to debate whether it's truly the right call to go into, let's say, North Africa before starting a front in Europe.

Are we going to do a Europe first policy versus Japan?
That doesn't make any sense.
Like we should focus on Pearl Harbor.
I could see all sorts of arguments sort of against that idea.
So how so basically what I'm basically asking you is how should Congress in this context of the story think about its role in wartime when the executive branch has certain advantages when it comes to military strategy?
Right. And time and time again, Truman was asked to look into these things.
He said, I'm not touching it.
I, you know, he wasn't in Europe.
He wasn't in North Africa and he refused.
And that's, I think, one of the big lessons we can learn from this.
In my lifetime, I've seen these commissions get formed and they're, you know, frankly, politicians are very interested in getting on TV and are having their sound bites or their tweets look good.
And they're perfectly willing to spout off about strategic or national security implication they don't really know about.
Truman resisted that time and time again.
I think it's a decent lesson.
And this is the key thing from what you just said.
It's not that the legislative branch doesn't have a role in input.
It's that the venue for that is not a committee with hyper specific mission oriented goals.
I think that's what I take it from what you just said.
Exactly. He wrote a, he wrote a very narrow mission statement that they would look into the defense spending program.
And actually it ended up being quite broad.
It gave them the leeway to look into a lot of things.
But Truman himself time and again would say, we are not looking into strategy.
We are not looking into battlefield conduct.
Several times the Pentagon came back to him and said, Hey, you're, you know, he would ask for information about a new bomber or some weapon.
And they would say, you know what, that's a strategic thing.
We're not going to talk to you about that Truman.
Oh, I'll give you the best example.
Several times Truman and his committee stumbled across huge expenditures in Oak Ridge, Tennessee and live, you know, and Los Alamos, New Mexico.
He sent a man out to Hanford, Washington to look into these giant expenditures.
George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army came over to Truman's office.
That's top secret that is a big giant spending program.
Hands off Truman back the way.
Possibly he could have saved some money in this giant expenditure.
Possibly he could have blown the lid off the biggest secret of the war,

which was the Manhattan Project, the project to create the atomic bomb.
You know, it's so interesting.
That's another good example that comes to mind.
The balance between secrecy and openness when it comes to the question of accountability.
I think a good example that comes to mind from the book is in one
of the reports that was a write up like analyzing America's like pursuit aircraft.
So like famously, like we we made excellent modern bombers in the 30s.
So the B 17, the B 24, the B 25, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera,
where we were desperately behind was in quote unquote, like pursuit aircraft.
So like this is the equivalent of like the BF 199.
If you're a German or like the Spitfire, if you're British, we had the P 40 Warhawk
and in their report, as you're telling the story, they said,
we have this fighter redacted, the P 40 Warhawk, that isn't effective.
When you're thinking about or as they're thinking about what's redacted,
how are people held accountable?
What is elevated?
How do you think about the balance between just keeping that fighter?
You know, I think it was what Curtis who made that.
If it's Curtis who's making that, does making that public hold them more
accountable or is there a balance to be held there?
Very much so. And it's a really tough call.
And there's no great answer here.
In some ways, the Germans certainly read the United States newspapers
and they would learn these things and there was genuine concerns about that.
At the same time, the Curtis company had a big giant contract with the federal
government, didn't like having it made public that its fighter plane
wasn't as good as the ones made by North American or Lockheed.
So there's always that tradeoff between putting information out there
to the public good versus the very genuine need to protect military secrets
and a couple of times the Truman committee ran up against the limits
of what a congressional investigation could accomplish.
Eisenhower would later call it the military industrial complex.
Sometimes Truman would find something very, very wrong going on in the war program.
The defense, the Pentagon learned during the war, they could shut him down by saying,
oh, national security, top secret.
We can't talk about that.
There wasn't a heck of a lot Truman could do.
And in a couple of instances, the Truman committee's failure stemmed
from the limits that a congressional investigation can accomplish.
Yeah, and I think that if people think of the situation in the defense
industry today, the problems, quote unquote, are pretty straightforward.
But could you just, in his best, you can sum up what the quote unquote
problem or challenge the committee was facing was.

So, for example, you know, he kind of sum this up.
I think that the examples would just be monopoly, cost overruns, profiteering,
like what were those problems that were narrowly mission focused?
There were several shortages were key.
So if you look at it, the United States was a peacetime capitalist economy,
way less government control than we have now.
Things like social security were considered, you know, outright communism or whatever.
And now suddenly the nation had to turn to a war economy in which take
a couple of examples, steel or gasoline.
Oh, who should get steel?
The Navy shipyard building warships, wait, the tank factory in Detroit.
Or wait a minute, the company building
merchant ships that are desperately needed on the West Coast.
Somebody had to sort this out and it wasn't going to be the free market.
The government was going to have to pick and choose who would get what
and how much it costs.
And that required a whole lot of degree of management in the economy
that had never happened before.
And that a lot of people were, especially big giant corporations,
were very much opposed to.
So here's Truman kind of inserting himself in the process saying, hey,
this isn't working.
Hey, why are there widespread shortages of aluminum?
Why isn't aluminum being produced?
Why is aluminum still going to the automobile manufacturers
when it should be going into airplanes?
The the decision to get Detroit to stop making automobiles
is exactly the kind of thing we're talking about during the war.
They didn't want to stop.
Finally, it wasn't until the Truman Committee reported on it.
And and finally in 1942, I believe the government came out and said, OK,
no more no more cars for the duration of the war.
That was a very difficult and controversial.
It seems easy now.
Why are we making cars?
We need tanks at that time, hugely controversial.
And it took a long time to get there.
Those are the kind of the challenges that the committee was facing.
One that's interesting in terms of the problems that he identified.
And I think this is from I guess this is the ultimate degree
of like Monday morning quarterbacking is Truman seemed specifically
deeply focused on including small businesses in the the programs,
etc., etc., etc., and is using that as part of his evaluatory

standard for the defense industry base.
But I guess from my perspective, that seems almost sort of political
assessment rather than one inherently interested in the best outcome.
So can you just kind of like so and push back if I'm just like looking at.
So basically, my point is if we're looking at the year 1942
and we need landing craft, the first question to me isn't OK.
Like, is this money going to a big corporation or is it going to a small business?
Because there's a way of saying that small business is inefficient.
The small business isn't going to be able to be put into this big scaling thing.
How would you think about this debate?
I totally agree with you.
And I think this was one of the weaknesses of Truman and maybe the committee a little bit.
And if we step back a little bit and let's talk about why Truman
was the last president to not have a college degree.
He was a high school graduate.
He was a small businessman himself in Missouri.
He had run a business and seen it fail.
He had struggled with this.
He had been a farmer.
And so he carried I'm from the Midwest myself.
And I know very well people in that time and place had a deep suspicion
of some giant corporation or bank far away in New York City or in Detroit.
And so Truman came into the committee thinking and his mail showed a lot.
Hey, how come how come GM or Ford got this big contract?
And yeah, you point out a really good point.
If the country needed hundreds of tanks and to be built in a day,
the expertise to build them was with General Motors and Ford Motor Company
and Chrysler Corporation or whoever.
It wasn't going to be some small businessmen in Missouri.
So yes, it was somewhat political.
It just reflected Truman's, in this case, somewhat limited worldview.
And it was kind of a failure.
He hammered this small business drum throughout the war.
It really wasn't practical to take some of these huge defense contracts
to build ships and tanks and all these things
and farm them out to little tiny businesses around the country.
They did make some progress here.
Having said that, as you point out, not only was it Truman's worldview,
it was extremely politically popular.
And many of the letters he received were talking about small businessmen
saying, hey, thanks for fighting the fight.
So again, the Truman committee is often kind of held up as some non-political thing.
Not true.

Truman was a politician just like everybody else in the Senate or in Washington.
Yeah.
And could you speak more about the monopoly side of this thing?
Because another thing that comes to mind as you're reading this book is,
if you think that the situation of monopoly is one where you do have
all these different, North American, North Grumman.
Actually, Northrup is a different company, even like Grumman.
Bowling, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.
Versus today where you have a hyper-hyper-consolidated defense industry.
So when he's describing monopoly conditions, he's like, well, buddy,
look at this thing 60 years later.
So just describe the American industry, quote unquote,
as we're looking at the ecosystem.
Very much so.
It's much less concentrated than it was now.
And yet, even at that time, there were airplane manufacturers all over the country.
But a lot of it, World War II, took the thing of to build the B-29 super fortress.
There was only one company in the world at that time
capable of building that airplane.
Having said that, hundreds and thousands of other companies had a role in subcontracting
and doing all this stuff the same way.
I grew up in Detroit, three big companies, and then this sort of network of
tentacles of little subcontractors doing all the work.
But it was very much clear during the war that without these giant corporations that had
vast experience in how to make a factory appear on a farm outside Detroit almost overnight
and start cranking out four-engine bombers eventually at the rate of one every 63 minutes.
Like, that was unprecedented.
And that did play an incredibly huge role in winning the war as much so or more than
the efforts on the battlefield.
So it was just a very different time.
And then a lot of the consolidation we see today began in, let's say, Northrop Grumman.
They're now the same thing, Lockheed Martin, which was a Glenn Martin company that was making
bombers.
A lot of these big conglomerates in aviation or aerospace were separate companies back in that time.
I want to kind of backtrack on my post-op dunking on the focus on small business.
Because I think to your point, you said this earlier, very eloquently, which is ultimately
these are choices of political economy.
So this isn't a free market.
So the government in some degrees making choices about what the war time and also the
post-war economy is going to look like.
So I guess the defense of some degree of bias towards small businesses is just an awareness
of the role the government would play in basically propping those up.
So I guess what I kind of asked for a corrective around is, if we think of the mythology around

World War II, the triumphs are building a B-24 bomber in a day instead of weeks or building a ship in weeks instead of months.
Those are very much those big industrial scale examples.
Can you think of any examples in your research or the story where it's like,
here's a small business.
It actually is that true American story.
There was this small businessman who had an innovation and fit into this scale and it all made sense.
During the war, there were countless examples.
And the press loved to single them out or this or that.
I mean, the Truman committee files are full of stories from inventors who would write in and they had invented something for the war.
But the press loved to single out.
I don't have specific examples.
A family in Iowa somewhere that was making one little part in their home,
manufacturing it or sowing it or whatever and feeding it into a giant corporation.
It was real and it did happen.
I'll give you another example.
About halfway through in 1942, the Truman committee glommed down to the notion of the helicopters.
A guy named Igor Sikorsky had invented and been protecting the helicopter in a small scale.
He had tried to sell it to the military.
No interest at all.
By 1942, his submarines were seeking ships in the Atlantic Ocean.
The Coast Guard, many others, everybody but the Navy had realized this was a really good idea.
And here was this sort of entrepreneur trying to build this machine.
Couldn't really get into the door in the Navy department.
So there were many, many examples and it would be some years until Korea,
really, before the helicopter would come into its own.
But there were countless examples of small people tinkering away in their garage or their basement who came up with an idea that could help out and won the war.
So there was a strong element of that.
Yeah, you're absolutely right.
We should tell both sides of that story.
And I think you actually gave a helpful mission-oriented way of distinguishing what I think is a little more ineffective small business argument from, I think, what the,
I think, effective on what you've been, which is, look, these are big, massive organizations.
You want to have a situation where new ideas, new approaches can be interjected into the system.
And that's what startups are.
That's what small businesses are.
So I think the question if I were on the Truman Committee would be, basically,
are there enough backstops or alternate procedures that mean that big Navy isn't just taking whatever the boys at Boeing send up and interjecting something new?
It's funny that you said that.

I hadn't really thought of it that way, but it was one of the key functions.
Early in 1941, Hugh Fulton, who was the chief counsel who ran the committee underneath Truman, sent out a note to the staff.
By now, Truman had gone on the radio saying, hey, America, right into us.
Harry Truman, Washington, DC, tell me what's going on.
They were getting countless letters, thick files of letters from inventors or people who had this or that idea for winning the war.
A lot of them were what?
At the time, they were called crackpots and they went into the file.
But Hugh Fulton had a rule.
Each one got a look by one of his investigators.
Each one got a response.
And he was very careful to say, yes, a lot of these are crackpots, but maybe there's something in there we should look at every single one and see.
Because again, you're right.
The Navy bureaucracy time and time again was very unwilling to change, very unwilling to embrace new ideas.
And so the Truman Committee saw its role as trying to be a bit of a backstop on it.
You know, I kind of skip through this question, but just talk about who Harry Truman was at this point in his career.
Because this isn't the Harry Truman who propagates the Truman doctrine.
This isn't the vice president.
This isn't the atomic bomb.
Like this is a very specific, somewhat underwhelming, I think, is the spirit that's captured.
So tell that story.
Like who is he at this point in his life?
Harry Truman came to the Senate in 1934.
And he was widely and derogatorily considered the senator from Pendergest.
Tom Pendergest was the machine boss of Kansas City politics.
Handpicked Truman to run for the Senate.
And Truman won election.
So when he got in Washington, everybody thought he was just a corrupt, corrupt, crooked politician sent there by the Kansas City machine.
Wasn't really true.
Truman, however, was good friends with Tom Pendergest.
He was happy to do the political patronage at the time demanded.
And yet Truman kept his own hands clean time.
And again, he refused to get rich off of the potential for corruption of being an elected politician.
Having said that, he came to the Senate.
He kept his head down.
He kept his mouth shut.
And basically he did almost nothing there for six years that anyone noticed.

In 1941, when he formed this committee, virtually unknown outside of Missouri,
and many people in Missouri couldn't have named the state's junior senator.
And then suddenly, because of finding his feet with this investigative committee,
three years later, he was vice president of the United States.
So having said that, Truman had served in World War I.
He was a combat veteran.
He was a captain in the artillery.
He had led his men into combat.
And then he had been in the 20s and 30s.
A county judge is more like a county commissioner in Jackson County, Missouri.
He had learned public service.
He had learned how to talk to people.
He was not a great public speaker.
He was learning that a little bit.
Never would be a great public speaker.
But basically, virtually unknown politician.
But the foundations were there for what would make him vice president.
I want to get some thoughts from you on, I think, a degree of frustration you're going to
experience about a world that no longer exists in the sense that,
so as you said, he didn't graduate from college,
but he's able to become a lieutenant in the Missouri National Guard.
Because back then, the men would literally vote on who became an officer,
which is, by definition, the opposite of a lot of the meritocratic advancements
we've made in the post-World War II era.
And once again, he also doesn't have a college degree.
He's very much like a failure in business.
And he's only able to keep moving up because a crooked old timing machine is selecting him.
Yet all those processes basically worked.
So I'm having a hard time of, and I think a lot of people do,
and this is why we're in this weird post-meritocratic backlash of the SAT-driven meritocracy
doesn't seem to produce leaders of that caliber at the same degree.
So cute.
There's no takeaway.
I'm not proposing we go back to the voting system for officers.
But yeah, I'd love to hear you reflect on that.
I mean, it's absolutely true.
And I think you say it's a nuanced thing.
Back then, of course, there were plenty of self-serving, crooked racist politicians
in the Senate and the House.
You know, Truman is the exception to the rule, perhaps, as in today.
There are certainly dedicated public servants in the government.
And there are also ones who are seeking headlines or taking advantage of social media.
Or it was a different time, but yet I see a lot of parallels for today.

Truman rose, as you say, in a meritocracy.
Truman rose to the top in a way that still happens once in a while.
And then at the same time, there were other politicians at the time
who were undeserving of their role in office.
That happens today, too.
No, it's interesting.
I take a lot of optimism from the study of history just in the sense that you read the
story that you're describing.
And it seems that despite the challenges we have today, they are not the challenges.
One would wake up with on December 8th, 1941.
So I guess my question for you is, do you come away from this history thinking of
the man or the woman in the case like meets the moment?
Like, does history, right?
Does history, right?
Could you look?
I feel, I remember this way.
I feel like you could look at America's situation in 1939.
It'd be very despairing, especially contrast to the rising fascists.
Do you just think that history produces opportunity?
And then how do you think about this?
Yeah, that's a really, really good question.
Watching the toxic atmosphere in Washington today, watching the absolute lack of bipartisanship,
it's easy to be a little despairing of the time.
But again, you can look at 1939 and say the same thing.
25% unemployment, a nation woolly unprepared for war, hungry people not being fed.
These are rough times.
And so sometimes leaders rise up to the top and sometimes they don't.
I don't know.
I too find examples.
I just read Adam Hochschild's recent book about the end of World War II.
Yeah.
And in a way, it was really shocking to be like, wow,
the country really went off the rails for a couple of years there.
This is really scary.
And then there was something reassuring about it, saying, well, yes,
the company has gone the wrong direction before, and we came back from it and survived.
And that was somehow in that book inspiring too.
I think the World War II period could say the same thing.
Or even if you look at Lincoln would be the best example.
The country was going very, very wrong in the 1850s,
and a leader rises in the right moment at the right spot.
You're probably as cynical as I as this sort of great man theory of history or whatever.
I don't know.

Truman took a lot of effort to make his own way here.
He got this little tiny appropriation to create this committee.
It was his hard work.
He's pulling all-nighters on this thing to make it successful.
And he took the care to reject a lot of the things that were shown.
Didn't work.
He didn't hire a political hack to run the administration of the committee.
He took very care to put decent, hardworking senators, joined them on the committee.
It was kind of a B-list of hardworking, but not super flashy senators.
So there's so many different variables that go into these things
beyond the notion that Harry Truman was somehow destined to do this.
It's interesting.
The one modification I'd offer on the great man theory of history things,
I think we could adopt a great man or woman theory of politics.
In the sense that, and this is the way you tell the story,
Harry Truman is making very specific decisions that 99 other senators,
there weren't 99 senators back then, right?
96 other senators, I believe, would not have made.
So I think we could really take away from this story,
but during moments of intensity, who's in the chair matters,
the values that person has matters,
and how they can and cannot learn from different history lessons.
So I think that's the one modification I'd offer.
So in this last section, I'd love to ask a couple more questions.
So number one, do you think that...
Okay, here's the...
Okay, so I might better articulate the question then.
So let's just say, if you're imagining there's a Harry Truman reading this book,
that being you could be anything from a state legislator to a small business person,
a National Guard's been like whatever, what would you want their takeaway to be?
Yeah, I think there are some lessons for leadership here.
I think some lessons in consensus building.
I think some lessons in sort of not needing the limelight,
not needing the spotlight.
I think if you use the Truman Committee as kind of a management study,
like I said, it was very pleasurable to watch him grow into the job in these four years.
He started off very shaky, very deferential to the powers that be that were coming for his committee.
Three years later, you see him much more willing to push back in a respectful,
civil way.
You see him, again, very deferential.
He was happy to hand off the chairmanship on any given day,
even to one of his Republican colleagues to let them take the lead.
So I think there's quite a bit you could learn from there.

If there's a Harry Truman out there today reading this book.
Another guest that came on the podcast this week,
this episode will be out on Friday.
But this aired, this episode on Revivancy Warrior on Thursday.
It's a guy named Andrew Hoenn.
He was at the New York Times and he's talking about defense policy.
And the book that he's talking on is very much oriented around the idea
that we should be open to difference and we should be open to the fact
that we're not able to just find the perfect mission and the perfect articulation.
And you should be aware of reward of randomness.
We started this conversation by arguing it was so important
that they were just so laser focused on this, this, this and that.
So I guess more from a, you know, guest, making different guests
pit themselves against each other unhelpfully.
What would you say is like the devil's advocacy against like the strict,
very zoomed in focus?
Sure. There were mistakes on the battlefield.
There were mistakes in military strategy being made.
You pointed out several of them.
Why are we going into North Africa?
Was that a diversion?
Was that merely an effort to preserve the British empire?
There were a lot of policy decisions that were hugely political.
And we're, oh, Eisenhower in 1944 was warned off of racing to Berlin
to go chase a sort of perceived Nazi stronghold in the Alps or wherever it was.
There were critical decisions to be made of military strategy
and Truman could have gone there or some other committee could have done there.
So yeah, there's, you know, by choosing a narrow laser focus.
Yep. Other decisions weren't criticized.
Fortunately, the United States government is big enough.
There were plenty of people in the press and in the government
to take on some of those, some of those other things.
You just hinted at something that really defines this era.
And I think if there's ever an equivalent situation
in terms of the 21st century, it's going to be have a similar dynamic
was it's just you're having members of Congress,
you're having employers, you're having, and once again,
it's men because we're talking about the 1940s, like men,
I'm not just being old timing, like the men of industry
from Sears, Roebuck are coming in.
How, if you're ever in a situation similar to this,
you're basically having to have always different parts
of the American coalition ecosystem come together.

If you're an industrialist who's making washing machines,
you have to start thinking about production of tanks.
What would your advice be for just basically anyone,
because this is what total war looks like.
In a society that's in the middle of a total war,
everything gets mixed together.
What would your advice and takeaways be for the awkwardness
or difficult parts that will come there?
It seemed like, I don't know, there might be some cynical things.
Oftentimes, as that time, as it would be now,
that washing machine manufacturer could watch his,
to use the gender of the time, could watch his competitor
who made, whose washing machines weren't as good quality,
but who had better connections in Washington, DC,
get the contract.
I mean, again, there's some of the things.
It's not just what you do and how you run your business,
but your connections and the networking.
That was no, to be cynical about it,
there was no different than that it is now.
And many of the dealings at the Truman committee
was looking into that didn't really make the headlines.
We're like, hey, I make really good military uniforms,
but the guy down the street, his uniforms are crummy,
but he got the contract.
Why is that?
Like politics is politics, never changes.
And this is a history book.
So I'm not asking for the politicized version of this answer
if you don't want to give it.
But I think if we're to articulate what went wrong
with both the committees before the Truman committee
and many of the committees after the committee,
probably really outside the CIA investigation
because it was so laser focused, what would you say
you would advise a ambitious smart politician to focus on,
given what you're describing, because key thing,
take away from what you're telling me here is,
it's not that there isn't a lot of serious analysis
to be done about the war on terror period
for the past 20 years, but from a peer,
how is this going to change the world
and result in billions of dollars saved,

fixing a system and saving lives?
That's backwards facing in the same way
that the post-1918 World War I analyses were.
And then two, it's easy to,
and I think I interviewed the chair
of the China Select Committee, Mike Gallagher,
and I think the China Select Committee is a good idea,
but that by its nature is going to get into values-based debates
away from the empirical ones.
So where would you identify maybe the forward-facing opportunities?
Because once again, the key thing is,
this committee started before December 7th.
So before there was a war on, it'd gotten started if it's work.
I'm not sure I'll have a major answer here
because I don't know the answer,
but I'll give you a couple of micro responses.
Truman realized early on, he did learn some stuff
in his first term in the Senate
that the committee staff was a huge role,
like hiring good staff and good people to work on her.
He called the attorney general.
He said, I want the best prosecutor you have.
That was very different than the way those committees usually run.
It would go to somebody who had just lost election
or a prominent private lawyer
who would happily put this feather in his cap,
but not really invest in the time.
Could the committee staff are really important?
I'll give you another example.
In 2020, in April, Congress passed a $2 trillion relief package.
Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House at the time.
Speaker of the House?
Yes, she was Speaker then.
Yeah. Nancy Pelosi went on the Colbert Report,
and Colbert said to her, tell me about the Truman committee.
It was one of many times over the last 50 years
that a big spending plan was passed in Congress,
and immediately they called her,
we need a new Truman committee.
There was a House committee created.
It was going to do the same thing.
It was going to look into how this $2 trillion got spent.
Name that committee?

I can't.
Never. It held a couple of hearings.
I followed it for a while,
while I was writing the book during the time.
It fizzled away.
The communications is important.
Truman approached the early work of the Truman committee
politically as well.
Army camps was low-hanging fruit.
He put out a report and made a big splash.
I will tell you,
in one of the biggest criticisms of the committee,
it's very early on Black leaders in the country reached out
and said, hey, you're looking into the defense buildup.
You should be looking at the rampant discrimination
in defense plans.
You should be looking at the rampant discrimination
in the military against Black people.
Truman took a pass on this pretty much.
He had scheduled some hearings and they went away.
But the bottom line was,
it was politically unpopular in his own party.
Franklin Roosevelt was very interested in preserving
his strength in the South
and not alienating racist white voters in the South.
In other words, Truman dodged the issue.
So there was politics involved here as there is an all thing
and communication.
Those are important things too.
I don't think I really answered your question
because I don't know.
But those are some of the examples of reasons why
this committee, as opposed to the dozens of other
investigative committees, became the one.
No, and you did answer my question just because I think
you actually gave a very effective playbook
for how a leader could actually approach a big bailout
of which we assume there will be other bailouts,
other government spending programs, etc, etc, etc.
And I think the other key thing too
that puts a book end to this is you just illustrated
the downside of consensus politics
in the sense that you're saying like,

look at Harry Truman, three Democrats,
two Republicans, he builds all this consensus.
Well, there is a cost to consensus.
Consensus cannot be treated.
And from a mission oriented perspective,
consensus is important,
but consensus is not necessarily a value in of itself.
So here's just the wrapping question I like.
I appreciate you referencing
Robert Caro's LBJ biographies
because they're really,
they're not just a story of 20th century America
and like the personal biography of LBJ,
but they're also like a meditation on power
and how it works.
What did writing and researching this story teach you about
power, corruption, how DC works,
any takeaways in the Robert Caro way in sense,
noting you didn't have 30 years to ruminate on that.
Very much so.
Don't you read Master of the Senate?
You think, why can't someone do that today?
Why can't somebody figure out how to make Congress
or the Senate the extremely dysfunctional Senate work?
I'm just fascinated by that topic.
But I did watch Truman navigate these waters.
He was very careful to do here.
It's amazing how much time he spent
talking to the majority leader,
talking to his colleagues in the Senate,
making sure he's stepping on toes,
avoiding dangerous political waters
that could have got him in big trouble.
You know, it was very smartly done
and it's kind of a cool story to watch Truman figure this out
and I'm sure, I'm no doubt, these are skills
that served him well when suddenly he began
president of the United States.
That is an excellent place to leave it.
Steve, this has been so much fun.
Really enjoyed the book.
Oh, same here.
And folks, should be sure to check it out.

Thank you for joining me on The Realignment.
Thanks, Marshall.
Hope you enjoyed this episode.
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or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A,
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Great.
See you all next time.
you