

[Transcript] The Realignment / 374 | Elliot Ackerman: How a Divided America Grapples its Past, Present, and Future

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

Leading into the long, remote early weekend, I'm continuing our bi-weekly series focused on American history.

Last episode focused on Harry Truman's leadership of the World War II-era Truman Committee that offers the perfect model for accountability and anti-corruption efforts in the defense industry. Today's episode is with return guest and veteran, Elliot Ackerman, who came on before to discuss his previous books, *The Fifth Act*, *America's End in Afghanistan*, and *2034*, a novel of the next World War.

His new book, *Halcyon*, is a fictionalized alternate history of the United States in the 2000s.

It deals with, and our conversation focuses on, the legacy of history, debates over how America should understand the legacy of the Civil War, and how individuals grapple with getting left behind amidst change.

Lots of great stuff here. Hope you all enjoy this conversation and the long weekend, and of course, a huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the work of this podcast. Elliot Ackerman, welcome back to The Realignment.

Yeah, thanks for having me, Marshall.

Yeah, it's great to chat with you. A lot of listeners are going to remember you from our interview about *2034*.

We then did an interview about your recent book about the withdrawal from Kabul slash Afghanistan.

And now you have a new book out this week called *Halcyon*.

And quick note, because you dropped this in a Q&A you did with your publisher, there's actually going to be a sequel to *2034* out.

And I know, I'll tell you, that was actually our bestselling book from our bookshop.

So I know, can you just do a quick *2054* shout out, because that's what listeners should really bookmark before we go in.

Sure, it's going to be out in March of next year, so March of 2024, but the title book is *2054*.

So it takes us 20 years into the future.

And as much as *2034* was a story that was about a war with China and the issues of cyber and how they would factor into that war.

2054 is a novel with many of the same characters and some new ones, but it is about civil unrest at home.

As we veer towards a civil war.

And on the tech front, it analyzes artificial intelligence and the integration of biological evolution and technological evolution sort of towards the singularity.

So I'm excited for it.

I think it's going to be a fun read and takes the *2034* narratives forward.

And that's actually the perfect transition to the actual book.

I'm surprised we were able to pull this off, but you were just talking about the future.

Halcyon is really much really a book about the past.

So how about you just kind of like introduce a the work, but how it fits into the broad set of writing you've put out just the past few years.

Well, *Halcyon* is it's a novel that's set in an alternate 2004.

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And in this 2004 Al Gore is president.

And we have figured out how to resurrect people from from from the dead.

And the title of the novel comes from the name of an estate, or one of the key characters Robert Abelson lives.

And he's one of these people who is in a who is who has been part of this prototype movement to bring individuals back from the dead.

So if the reader will bear with me on those sort of scientific leaps and science fiction leaps of faith, you know, what the novel is really about is about how we judge people from other times in our own times.

And so Robert Abelson, this character who we meet early on in the book is really he's a man who was very well-regarded in his own time, but he is now living out of time and and struggling to keep up with social conventions as they've changed rapidly all around him.

You are how old are you if you don't mind me asking?

No, I'm 43.

So you're 43.

Okay, so to what degree do you does the whole like person out of time argument resonate with you just because like I'm a middle millennial I'm 31.

So like very clearly I'm a little outside like Gen Z dynamics, etc, etc, etc.

So how does this idea of like being out of time like apply to your life now?

Well, I guess maybe why don't I tell I'll give you kind of the nexus of this book.

You know, each one of my books starts a little bit differently, but my so my wife, her mother and her father had a pretty significant age difference, more than 25 years.

And so her father who I never met was a World War two veteran.

He served in the OSS.

He actually was part of the group that rescued some of the do little Raiders out of occupied China.

And then he came back from World War two had this, you know, whole other career as a as a lawyer in Delaware, and the kind of like an Atticus wish type or Atticus French type character sorry and you know it was just beloved.

I mean the one thing you know in his family and in my wife's community is like he is a guy who they talk about to this day in referential tones.

And so being part of her family you know I have been living with this very present memory of him.

And there's always been this refrain of you know what do you think daddy would think about acts or what do you think daddy would think about why.

And, and that refrain is particularly sped up, you know as the last few years the country's gone through a whole number of social upheavals.

So I had a very intense dream just a few years ago.

It's one of my regrets is that I never had a chance to meet him where he and I just had a conversation in this dream.

And as as as in focus as though we were sitting across the table from one another.

And we talked about a whole host of issues I sort of woke up from that dream and this idea of a man living out of time just kept lingering with me.

So really with the novel what I wanted to do was to set up an alternate reality and an alternate past to sort of see how a person you know who is who is not who is not my father in law but is someone

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who loved in his own time how he would survive in a time that was not his own.

And so the little piece of alternate history that I that I play with is we look back historically speaking I think everyone can agree that the 2000 election was a real fork in the road for the country that was decided by a little over 500 votes in Florida.

And so in my alternate 2004 when Gore wins the election one of the things we I think we forgotten is that when Bush actually won that election the year before we had mapped the human genome.

So that happened in 1999 and that opened up a whole slew of research to include research into cloning and cryonics.

And when Bush became president he shut down all that research because of his religious beliefs. So a lot of that was it was all rolled back.

And so in my alternate 2004 when Gore wins none of that research gets rolled back and there's this sort of innovation that allows this individual Robert Abelson to sort of come back and walk around at a time that's not his own.

And then he's very quickly enmeshed in a you know in a number of controversies. One has to do with Civil War monuments. Another one has to do with sort of a chapter of his past that gets dredged up that has sort of a me too angle on it.

But it's really this idea of how difficult it is to judge people out of time and how we start dredging up the past and dredging up people who lived in different times.

They they start you know they can start walking around in surprising ways in our own time.

You know it's really interesting to your point around Bush and the bioethics debates from the early 2000s. I when I was interning at AI back in 2015 one of the last things I did was I had to photocopy Leon Cass's just correspondence from the period and Leon Cass was one of the leading ethicists who was like in the middle of like the stem cell research and all of that debate and this is just a debate that I think is going to be really just it's been told we memory hold on 15 different levels especially because it was pretty clearly rejected at an electoral level you

know the famous ad that Michael J. Fox gave in favor of stem cell research but I'm just I'm just curious let's just like take a step out of the book for a second what what do you like separate from the you know this stopped us from having you know immortality or to think about that 2002-2003 era debate around bioethics looking back.

Well I think if you listen I think it mirrors debates we're having right now on AI right there's sort of you know a very lively debate going on and real and I think social anxiety about what artificial intelligence means for the future of the species and much the same way that the bioethics debate was one that seem as though it would greatly impact the future of the species and as you mentioned it's sort of

been memory hold but I think what that when I look back at it that debate it reminds me when I look at debates the film media right now that that our morals are not fixed.

Our sense of what is right and right is wrong is never fixed even though in the present we seem to reach conclusions as though morality is fixed for all for all time.

And I think that should lead any person to carry with them a certain degree of humility because as much as you know you or I might feel certain that we're right on issue X or issue Y and that this is now a settled issue.

The people who live after us will most assuredly come back and judge us and to believe that that these issues are fixed in time is I think a great fallacy.

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And so the book is really a story about what it's like to be up to be uprooted in that way to try to you know to try to have someone who's good in their own time come back and live in a time that's not their own and how that can compromise them.

And I think and I hope that the book will speak to anyone who has felt in the last years maybe you felt this way I've certainly felt this way where suddenly norms of behavior and societal norms are changing so quickly like we're really struggling to keep up and to understand the earth as it's shifting beneath us on a whole host of issues.

Yeah, and you know this isn't going to delve into the realm of spoilers because it's fairly early on in the book but I was I really enjoyed the focus on the Civil War and Shelby foot as a historian actually have a copy of his work back there it's never going to be read but I got the nice like hard cover thing from the publisher so it looks cool.

So, can you really just contextualize Shelby foot and the 1990s discourse over the Civil War, because it's a theme in the book but I think a lot of people are going to have context of why Shelby foot as a historian is a part of I don't want to say like dog whistle when I get an offensive sense but like, oh yeah like you're speaking to a big debate that the country kind of went through, even before the Trump era stuff.

Well, I mean these so the when the when the novel opens we meet Abelson and but it's sort of the narrator is not Robert Abelson it's a guy named Martin Newman and he is sort of like a, you know, and Nick care away from the great Gatsby as narrator who's watching Abelson story and but Martin is himself a historian, and he is on sabbatical at Halcyon trying to write his first book.

And it is a book about the Civil War but wrestles with this this idea, which is one Shelby foot would often say in interviews that the essential genius of America is our ability to compromise, and our one great failure to compromise resulted in the Civil War.

And he and so Martin Abelson is sort of tormented by this question like is the genius of America, or ability to compromise, or are there certain issues on which there is no there is no compromise and they truly are black and white.

And I think that theme to me resonates with you know one of the most essential things in life that is black and white is life and death.

And so this is a novel which suddenly the boundary between life and death becomes becomes permeated.

So I mean you know Kafka family set famously said what gives life meaning is that it ends.

So you know there's the characters for wrestling with this but in the case of Shelby foot I think he's probably he's listening he came he he came to he was a novelist who wrote a three volume, each volume 1000 pages.

So 3000 page work called the Civil War, a narrative, and it was really his life's work.

And the book came out over, you know, having the first volume came out in the 60s, the last two sort of in the early 70s and the late 70s, but he was catapulted to fame.

And Ken Burns is 1991 documentary The Civil War which really ran on PBS and made Ken Burns his name, because of the talking heads in the Civil War Shelby foot is is really you know he's probably half of it.

And he's you know and he's he's a southerner he's from Mississippi, and speaks in sort of a low lilting draw and has all these sort of great one liners throughout that series.

But as much as he sort of was beloved in the 1990s on series came out he's sort of taken a

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downward turn.

You know recently, because his book is very much the narrative history, which I would I would encourage someone to read.

I fact did it all a couple years ago on audible as my New Year's resolution was 152 hours on audible took me nine months.

So as an aside, I would recommend that it's amazing it's like living the Civil War at four times speed. So you know you're two or three months into this thing and you're like I don't know I don't think the North's going to pull this off the South's really you know kick in their asses and then you know you really live the whole arc of the Civil War but you know so he's you know he was sort of a remarkable figure and I sort of have that he walks on and off of the page in the book sort of my fictionalized Shelby foot character.

But to me he's emblematic again of a person who you know was celebrating in his own time and has recently kind of come out of favor, and I think the Civil War is also important because it's a it's an issue in our history that is probably the least fixed.

It's been reinterpreted in a story that's been retold so many times up to today.

I mean we've seen I think there's any historical period in our time that's been more highly contested in the last, you know, five to 10 years than the Civil War which happened 150 years ago.

Yeah, no I think that's that's just fascinating when you kind of like put it that way in the sense of every generation is having to relitigate the Civil War.

And for example look at the Civil Rights Movement like obviously there's all sorts of nuance in this different direction what happened in the 60s but in as as we saw with AOC and Ted Cruz getting in a fight about like who was responsible for the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

You're there there's easy to find it's actually pretty easy with that case to find like some shared narrative, we could share afterwards like it's like this was a good thing.

We're all happy and actually we were the ones who did it know we were the ones who did it that's what that fight is both the Civil War it's actually what does the word because even when you said his articulation of compromise I'm like hmm like is compromise a good thing if it's a compromise over slavery.

If it's if it's America is genius for compromise and that seems like that's not a particularly useful genius in that sense like would it be would it have been genius to compromise with the Nazis etc etc etc.

So it's so interesting that way.

Another thing that comes out through the book is this idea.

It's an alternate it's an alternate history so you're focusing on this but you spend some time.

Writing about Stonewall Jackson and just sort of the what if Stonewall Jackson had not been accidentally killed by friendly fire in 1862 and you just have this fun line where you basically say like if you think about it there's so many different instances of history being different by just this this or that thing happening.

You're obviously doing this to the narrator but for you personally Elliot like what are just some examples that you could just think of throughout like American history you're like man like I'm really wondering how things could have been different maybe it's even in your own life.

Well I think and I'll get back to Stonewall Jackson on a second.

It's just what you were saying Marshall kind of reminded me of several things.

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Well first of all I think you know I'm a war veteran.

So I think that one of the things that comes out of that experience is your you constantly then have this history.

You know if you've seen combat if you've had friends you've gotten hurt where you're always rolling over this like you know this should have could have would have like what if you know what if Jones you had across the street that day what if he I mean it's very much part of war is this you know if only this happened.

So I think that forces us into these types of frames of mind which are alternate histories at the at the interpersonal level and then even at the political level.

And I think when we look at the the Civil War.

It's one of these conflicts where our country just you know fundamentally goes in a different direction.

It's very defining.

It's a second.

It's I think very actively been called a second American Revolution.

And and it's also one we're in the years after the Civil War.

As you know I mean fiercely contested what was this you know what was this war about you know and the sort of the lost cause ism has always been you know this was you know this was a war about states rights and you northerners can't come down here and tell us how to live our lives and then you know the

you know we're not going to have slavery in this country anymore.

And something that's always been interesting to me is I feel like there's always been this tension in the narratives like well which side is right you know this is an argument like well.

In a war the fact that there are two opposing sides who cannot really agree or don't align on what the war is about is usually the reason you're fighting the war.

If everybody agreed what the war was about you probably want to be fighting a war like let's look at like Russia and Ukraine right now.

You know Russia says Ukraine is part of Russia and you know and Ukraine says you know we are an independent country they can't even agree what the war is about and that's why they're fighting a war.

And then I think when we look after the fact how we remember the Civil War there's all sorts of wrinkles there.

So like for instance you know if you go out on the street today and say I think to most most people you know particularly in like the you know and sort of more liberal liberal enclave claims of the United States.

Like hey should there be Confederate war memorials up in the United States.

And most people say no like we need to tear all them down get rid of them.

And I would you know I agree with that by and large but like but it does it but it starts to get complicated when you look at the history of some of these memorials.

So like I and I write about this in the book.

Like most people don't realize that there is a Confederate war memorial at Arlington National Cemetery.

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Like the hallowed of Hallows has a Confederate war memorial there.
And so when you start unpacking like well why is that there.
What you realize the reason that the way that memorial came into being is President McKinley in the late eighteen hundreds after we had fought and won the Spanish American War.
He was the one who put that memorial there.
And the reason he did it was first of all the Spanish American War fought in the late eighteen hundreds was the forced war since the Civil War in which north and south had to fight together again.
So the fact that that was even going to happen was not a sure prospect.
But they did.
But then after the Spanish American War quick quick pause just triggered one of my favorite like random history facts.
One of the I can't remember his name but one of this is in Theodore Roosevelt's biography.
This is Edmund Morris is rise of Theodore Roosevelt one of the generals who led American troops in the field was a former Confederate veteran.
And he would just like he was kind of senile at that point.
And he would just shout about Yankees as they were fighting in the field.
So like that's that's literally what we're doing.
This is the this is the literal like reconciling on at that.
And it's totally.
And it's really messy.
Like what America looked like at that point.
And if you do the imagine work like that would it like what a messy country we were or half the country had just fought the other half and they're all and they're all still alive.
But so when you when you learn about that that that that Memorial McKinley they think we win the Spanish American War.
And they we need a peace treaty which is the Treaty of Paris.
That peace treaty was what basically allowed the expansion of American colonialism in the Philippines and Cuba.
So McKinley as a champion is trying to champion American colonialism.
The great the great obstacle to American colonialism at this point were the southern senators.
The southern states were refusing to ratify this treaty.
And so to pander to them what he did was he said OK I'll let you bury southern soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.
And that was a tool he used to galvanize the south to ratify the Treaty of Paris to allow for the colonial colonial expansion.
So it's sort of like it's all of these like no very sort of strange nasty cross currents that are complex.
So the end.
So the idea that there's just sort of this like these are the good guys.
These are the bad guys.
You know is a little bit of a fallacy like it's it's messy.
Just like America is pretty messy.
And so I think when you start going and you start picking apart the strands of America of our

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history.

The thing that I always you know that I find moving when I read about this when these issues when I learn about these issues is how human it all is.

And so you know you started with kind of talking about Stonewall Jackson.

I think one of these little and this is a sort of a moment of like humanity.

So Stonewall Jackson you know in late 1862 into 1863.

You know the Confederates are sort of on a roll of battlefield victories and seem somewhat unstoppable despite there's despite their inferior numbers.

And at the Battle of Chancellorsville which is a huge Confederate victory after the first night of the battle Stonewall Jackson rides out to do a.

He's going to do a night attack and finally you know kind of seal the deal with the Union and he rides out past his own lines to do a reconnaissance.

And as he's riding back into his own friendly lines he's shot by a Confederate sentry in the arm a few days later they amputated his arm.

But a few days later he dies of pneumonia.

And one of the great alternate histories has always been so that was in May of 1863 in July as Gettysburg.

And if you go to the Gettysburg battlefield where much of this novel kind of takes place in the history of Gettysburg and the stories around Gettysburg.

On the first day of the battle there was some high ground and General Lee said basically to Stonewall Jackson's replacement his exact orders were take the high ground if practicable.

Those have been picked over for years because the high ground was not taken.

But historians have said you know if Stonewall Jackson had been there knowing him and he was known as a very sort of aggressive forward in the saddle.

Like he would have taken that high ground and had he taken that high ground you know likely likely chance the Confederates could have beat the northern troops there.

Likely chance then you know the Civil War would have had a different outcome anyway and this whole cascade of events.

Now I'm not saying that's definitely what would happen.

But I think it shows our proclivity particularly as Americans on some of these issues to always imagine these you know what what you know what could have happened how radically different could our country be.

And I think that's such an American thing to do because you know we are a country of of dreamers and people who sort of come here and you know made a nation that's not like many other countries of blood and soil nation.

We're a you know we're a nation that just sort of keeps building itself out of ideas and out of the stories that we tell.

So I'm I'm as you can tell endlessly fascinated by these topics.

Yeah but I guess we'll go back to my kind of pitch for you as an author which is that you're.

I think you're really balancing past present and future present with your Atlantic writing future with 2034 2054 and then obviously how see on in this style stuff with with history.

How does the conversation we just had about the Spanish American wars role and national reconciliation.

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A lot of the writing you're doing about future conflicts and ways that the issues we're seeing in the Russia you can't retrace and war really presaging what the future could look like.

How does that really unify with your concerns about national unity because this seems to be all.

It just seems all I think the thing that makes this era really interesting is you have always commingling variables just mixed together.

And it's difficult to have just a clear takeaway.

I think that I think the truth lies in complexity.

You know, that's what that's what I find fascinating about.

You know writing about telling stories is so there is you know why do we like why do we tell stories.

We tell stories to make meaning out of very complicated events for which oftentimes there isn't true meaning I mean it's a way that human beings order chaos as we take a bunch of chaotic events and we the way we organize them is and do a story.

So,

know if there is you know one clear through line on on any of this.

Aside from just having an awareness of the different stories that that are being told and the different narratives that are being propagated.

And as opposed to serve what I think is sort of the enemy which is believing that issues are black and white and that one set of one one side is wholly good and the other side is wholly evil.

Because that's not I mean as you know like that's not that's not true.

You know the truth is truth lies in complexity.

What I'm curious about is where where where where are you from, and I'm asking that in the sense that I know just like raving read your books like you spend some time growing up in London, but so much of the discourse in the writing in the book is really rooted and where people are from like, you know there's a

friend who's a missus it you know he's from Mississippi so when he's writing about the Civil War that's obviously going to impact how he approaches the things about that topic, etc, etc, etc.

So, where are you rooted in terms of this country and how does that shape how you look at our history.

Oh man you're only asking the hard questions today.

I've actually never known how to answer someone asks you where I'm from I don't you know I was I was born in Los Angeles.

I grew up in London I moved there when I was nine.

I moved back to the States when I was 15 to Washington DC, and then I left for college Boston Marines North Carolina, I've lived overseas for a few years I sort of moved every every five years so. So, I guess I would you know my my mother's family are all Christians and my father's families are all Jews.

So, I think I'm just sort of that like distinctly American breed of mongrel.

That's not necessarily from like one particular place I'm speaking to you today from Washington DC. And I think that has.

You know it gives you certain advantages and that I know throughout my life I've always known I can I can move around with relative ease if you were to tell me tomorrow that I had to go live and I don't know Budapest I'd probably be fine with it and make myself pretty comfortable there.

But you know but the downside is you know I have many people I love who are really from place like

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my wife, my wife is really from Wilmington Delaware, you know her whole families from Wilmington. They are deeply deeply rooted in that place, and I see the benefit of having those types of deep roots, but I think if you were to ask me what the perspective is from which I'm trying to look at these distinctly American issues.

I think I'm trying to as a writer.

Where effectively with as much empathy and intelligence as possible, you know the masks of each of my characters.

You know when I'm writing a character, no matter how good or reprehensible they are, when they step on to the page, you know, they are making their case before the reader as though they're making their case before God, like that's my job is to let them make their case.

And so I think that forces me, you know, when I'm writing to be from, you know, from many places and to hold many perspectives in my mind.

Yeah, that's so fascinating.

Something we get from listener from listeners are lots of we do we do this like q amp a function for the podcast and we get lots of questions about fiction.

And we can never give a proper answer because in soccer, soccer and I are deaths are desperately under revenue comes to fiction.

And we can't keep on recommending the three body problem and enders game to people.

So can you just talk about fiction.

I love every game.

Yeah, it's a cliché.

It's like, obviously, oh, you like forward policy forward affairs like I was a 12 year old to I thought I was so smart.

But now that I'm actually speaking with a fiction author who's still rooted in the like policy public affairs stuff that the podcast is mostly focused on.

You just kind of like talk to those listeners like what.

And when I'm talking about listeners, I'm saying these tend to be college kids who are like, Hey, like, I'm kind of getting more into reading.

I'm doing lots of audible like talk to them about fiction, wherever you want to take it.

Well, I'll tell you an anecdote about interest game and then we can talk about fiction.

Yeah, I was I was, you know, I was sort of a classic, I don't know, like, boy who didn't read a lot.

I just wasn't into it.

I wanted to be outside.

I want to be hanging out with my friends and sell my father when he was kind of running heard on on on me and my brother over the weekend.

He would make us read in our room for an hour.

And I would often just sit there and like stare at the walls.

And so one of the books he gave me to read was Enders game.

And I didn't read it.

And then I sort of, I don't know, however many hours had passed that I thought was convincing to convince him that I'd read it.

I said, Hey, dad, you know, I finished Enders game.

He's like, Oh, yeah, what'd you think of him?

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I was like, pretty good, pretty good.

He's like, what do you think of that ending?

I was like, good ending, good ending.

Like, and if anyone knows like Enders game is one of the greatest endings of all time with like a pretty amazing plot twist where the whole book comes into focus in the last few pages and you understand this world you've been in in a totally different way.

So if you're if you're listening and you haven't read Enders game, I couldn't recommend that enough. But Tony, I had not read the the end of Enders game and I went back and read it and it blew me away.

So anyways, there's there's hope for all of us.

Listen, I think what I, I write, I write fiction, I write nonfiction, I do journalism.

Fundamentally, writing, you're trying to tell a story.

And you're trying to tell a story that I try to I try to write the types of books that I enjoy reading, frankly.

And the books that I enjoy reading, I think leave me at the end sort of I shut the book.

And I'm kind of find myself a looking at a subject a little bit differently and sitting there with a lot of questions.

And so when it comes to writing fiction, I think what's so you're trying to create the same effect, I think, in any type of story, whether it's fiction or nonfiction, but obviously in fiction, anything can happen.

Now, at the beginning of a novel, you know, you from the first sentence, you start putting up constraints around yourself, right?

Just little choices like, OK, am I going to tell us in the first person or in the third person who's my narrator going to be?

What's the time frame?

What's the structure of the book?

So immediately, you when as soon as you start putting form around a story, you know, it's it's it's not it's not it has rules and constraints.

You know, it's not just finger painting at that point.

There are rules around what you're going to do.

But within fiction, obviously, the great rule that you you always know that you can always break is, you know, none of this stuff had to have happened.

So that allows you to go in many different directions.

But the effect you're trying to make with a reader, I think is always the same effect, which is them being immersed in a story that's going to stay with them.

You know, something I'm curious about this show is called the realignment.

We're really focusing on helping people understand the world.

Time is difficult.

Everyone's really busy.

So there's all these podcasts and it's always like fiction books to read and nonfiction books to read. I was just thinking about this as I was listening to your book on my morning walk, just because I've spent a lot of time.

I'm doing like a hardcore like Asia Pacific World War Two kind of deep dive.

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So lots of Pacific theater stuff.

And I was listening to a fiction book on the walk, which I don't typically do.

I was like, oh, this is like a different experience.

I'm thinking about things differently.

I'm not quite memorizing facts in the same way to which which helps.

And this isn't like an either or answer.

But does fiction or nonfiction help you better comprehend the world and understand how things are or interpret how things are going around you?

I don't want to say better or not better, but I would say that the, you know, a couple of historians I know have both independently made the point to me that when they're going back and they're trying to really just understand like what was it like to live in time.

They don't sit there and, you know, they'll read the history and other history, but they'll go read novels that were written at that time because novels are so much a mapping of the interiority of characters and of story.

So, you know, if I want to know what it was like to live in the Gilded Age, I could go read a whole bunch of, you know, histories of Gilded Age New York, right?

If I really want to know what it felt like to live in the Gilded Age.

Yeah.

I'd go read some either.

I feel like that would give me some Henry James.

Like that's going to really let me feel like I've got my finger on the pulse and I know what it's like to walk into a room and what that room would feel like at that time.

So I think I, you know, I read a blend of both.

But I feel like probably on the whole walk away from fiction with sort of, you know, more truths that I kind of carry with me well into the future than, you know, when I'm just reading histories.

But like, but like I was just saying, you know, having sat there and listened to the entire, you know, Civil War narrative for nine months, like that was an amazing experience that, you know, really opened up my understanding of those four years of American history.

Why was that your New Year's?

What was that preparation for this book?

Or you were just like, this is a, this is a tome of like, this is one of those things you like, why did you choose that one?

I was sort of a little inside baseball, but the life opens up in weird ways.

And I'd always, I'd always seen the Ken Burns documentary and it's, and it's brilliant.

You know, even the people I think have like poo poo did a little, I mean, it's brilliant.

You know, if you haven't watched it, you got to watch it.

It's amazing.

It's on Amazon Prime people.

So you can make this happen.

It's on Amazon Prime.

Yeah.

Pretty easy.

And it's actually, if you look at it, it is, it is basically what Burns, Ken Burns did,

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and all of you will talk about this, basically adapted Shelby Foote's book, An Erative History of the Civil War.

I mean, in the end, I mean, there's whole passages that are very much lifted from the Shelby Foote book.

And actually the very final episode, the way the, the way that the whole documentary ends is, is a lift from the way

An Erative History of the Civil War ends.

So it's, it's, you know, it's, I don't, I watch when I see it as adapted, but the way I, so I'd always known, you know, I'd always noted this connection to the documentary.

I always, you know, because I'm a military man by background knew that sort of reading shall be able to say you had read Shelby

Foote Civil War, An Erative History was like one of the great reading challenges out there.

It's like being able to say, you know, I, I read, you know, I read all of Proust.

But I also knew like, I'm never going to like, I was like, I'm never going to do it.

Over the years, Shelby's son, Yuji Foote, has become a friend of mine.

And he's a very talented fine arts photographer.

Actually, he did the author photo on Halcyon and it's done a couple of my author photos and I have this photography in my home.

So he's a dear friend of ours.

And we were a few years ago sitting around kind of the table in our apartment and it was right before Christmas.

And I was catching up with Yuji who lives in Memphis.

And, and he said, Hey, you know, it's actually pretty exciting.

They're re-releasing on audible my father's narrative history unabridged.

And I was like, Jesus Christ, like, how long is that?

He's like, it's 152, 152 hours, Elliot.

You know, and I was like, but then I was like, you know what, New Year's is coming up.

Like, I've always wanted to be able to do this.

Like, that's, I could do three hours a week, three hours a week.

I could do that when I'm at the gym, when I'm on the subway.

So I made it my New Year's resolution to just listen to the whole thing.

And it was, yeah, it was a great experience.

So for the last few questions, this is something I was really, really curious about at an author level.

You spent the, I think the 2000s.

You're an interesting person to write about the 2000s because you literally beyond, you know, being in North Carolina, we're not there for this period in the sense of the war on terror.

Like you're in Iraq.

I'm like, oh, like you were probably in Fallujah.

Like during like this, like this time period, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

How, how, how, how do you interpret the 2000s and how is it just to write about them?

Just give, because I feel like you were probably just checked out.

Like, for example, I do not think you spent 2002 thinking about bioethics debates in the sense.

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So how do you, how did you think about, how do you think about writing about that?

No, I didn't.

I, you know, I got asked a couple of years ago to be a talking head on the, the CNN, the 2000s, which made me feel really old.

That's so funny.

That's a great, that's a great, it's a great series.

It's a great series.

I feel like, oh, I should wear my like, I'm like, what do I have?

It's like 2000 vintage.

Like if I was in the one in like the nineties, I would have like my Reebok pumps or something like that.

Yeah.

Um, I, you know, I felt like I was present for, I was present.

I certainly felt like I was present for events that kind of pinged in the 2000s, like the Iraq war.

I was sent down.

I was in Katrina as a Marine.

They sent me down to Hurricane Katrina, like just three days after the storm.

Um, Israel invaded Lebanon.

Actually a friend of mine, um, is a writer, uh, Phil Clyde.

I don't know if you're familiar with this word, but he will have him on the show.

Yeah.

Okay.

He's great.

But Phil often teased me.

He's like, Elliot, you were like the forest gump of the 2000s.

Um, because for whatever, particularly when I was in the Marines, I just sort of wound up being where, where certain things were happening.

But, um, I think it, uh, yeah, it makes you, you know, it makes you feel a little bit, uh, it just makes you realize the passage of time when you're writing about events that to you in your memory seem relatively present, but you kind of head check yourself.

Like, no, that was like 20 years ago.

So, um, and I think that's one of the reasons why I wanted to set the novel in an alternate 2004.

Because when you say it, at least when I don't know what I say it to you, it doesn't really seem that long ago.

Like, oh, 2004.

But then you realize like, actually that's history.

It just, it just, it just hit me as, this is the first year, but this feels like old to me at least.

It's like, you know, it's like, it's like now, yes, it's putting a mark saying actually.

Or is now history.

Um, so it's, you know, sort of like the, um, the great tourism with, uh, was a Marty Mc, Marty McFly's DeLorean when he goes back to what is it?

1984.

Uh, or is it 1983?

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He goes back to the fifties.

Yeah.

Yeah.

But he goes, yeah.

So he goes from the fifties, but like, it's like that was 30 years.

I'm like, what is that, you know, from now?

So it's, you know, it, yeah, it's just realizing that as time passes and, you know, you get older, you will have witnessed history.

And I guess I'm, I'm, you know, I'm, I'm nodding to that in the book too.

So the last question is going to be totally out of left field, but it just so speaks to what the podcast has really focused on lately.

Um, I loved your Atlantic.

There's no easy pivot for this.

Um, I loved your Atlantic piece on the arsenal of democracy.

So just given the fact that we're normally like a policy focused podcast, I'd love for you just like in these last few minutes, just to sort of like unpack, um, your writing on the arsenal of democracy defense production topic.

Because just from my perspective as like a DC foreign policy think tanker, it seems that like this is the like critical issue of this moment of your focus on this space.

So I just love to hear your quick finishing perspective on it.

Oh, well, uh, thank you.

I'm glad you enjoyed that article.

Yeah, I think so for that article for Atlantic, I was down in Camden, Arkansas, and visited the Lockheed plant where they make high Mars.

And, and all the attendant munitions that are on that are being used right now in Ukraine.

And it was just sort of an opportunity to go and just really see like, okay, let's see, like, whereas how is this stuff built.

And I think I walked away from that kind of with two conclusions.

Um, first of all, I think sometimes it's Americans because we have this sort of, uh, sense of our nation as being the one that, you know, out produced every other country in the Second World War and then beat the Soviets in the Cold War that we just sort of have these factories churning out weapons at all time.

And our arsenal of democracy is really just a matter of like, you know, taking the switch from low production and turning it to high production and off these things will run.

And that is like not the case.

Um, and, you know, as impressive and hardworking as those folks down in Camden are, like, you know, these are people with, you know, with, you know, drilling holes in the metal and putting these high Mars together like erector sets and there's only so fast.

They can, they can assemble these weapons systems.

And so I think it was a, for me, just a nice wake up call to recognize that as the world becomes a much more dangerous place.

Uh, we as a country are going to have to make, you know, real strategic decisions about how much we want to invest in our industrial base and simply saying that the, um, the military industrial

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complex is an inherent evil.

And we're not going to invest in these capabilities.

I think that is probably lazy, you know, lazy and non-strategic thinking.

We need to, you know, it's worthwhile to really understand what goes into, um, uh, you know, what goes into rolling these types of platforms off the line and making sure that we are ready to respond. To, to, you know, any threats, whether they be Ukraine or, or Taiwan.

So I think that is a real question for ages.

How are we reinvesting, um, in, in the country?

So yeah, I'll tell you what, a funny thing about that piece sort of behind the scenes, um, give you a little, a little color for you and your listeners.

I broke my toe the day before I had to go right that piece.

And so the entire time I was on the floor of the, of that Lockheed plant, I, I was wearing my house slippers.

So, you know, the, the, you know, it's always like the sublime mixed with the ridiculous cause I was like hobbling around, uh, this Lockheed plant where they're, you know, retrofitting high Mars.

And I can, I can barely walk.

And the only thing I can put my foot into is the house slippers.

So sometimes journalism can be very perilous.

It's a very, uh, forest gump, uh, gump of you.

No, I think that I just, the, I wanted to start up that piece just because we've had, um, this is me speaking to listeners, like we've had Bridge Colby on.

We've had a bunch of debates around like this trade off between the Asia Pacific and Europe.

And I think the piece just really illustrates the wonky themes.

And I like, this is how this is actually being experienced like on the ground.

So for folks who listened to those episodes we've done on those, like, I think this is the perfect follow up to those.

Um, glad we could shout out most of your writing.

Um, Elliott, this has been really great.

Always a pleasure to have you on.

We'll keep having you on when you have a new book out, which once again seems to be a once a year kind of step functions.

We'll just kind of keep that up.

No, thanks.

It's always, always great to come on.

And yeah, I would love to come on in a bit to talk to you about 254.

Hope you enjoyed this episode.

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See you all next time.

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