

## [Transcript] The Realignment / 375 | Craig Nelson: How America Became the "Arsenal of Democracy" and the Lessons for Today

Marshall here, welcome back to The Re-alignment.

The team and I decided to take a quick post-mortem weekend break, so it's great to be back with a full episode this Thursday.

Today's episode is with the author Craig Nelson, who has recently released a new book, *V is for Victory*, Franklin Roosevelt's American Revolution, and the triumph of World War II. I wanted to speak with Craig because his retelling of how in FDR's phrasing the quote arsenal of democracy played a humongous role in winning World War II is incredibly relevant to the challenges we face today.

Just to run through the stats, during the World War II period, the American Heartland produced 2.5 million trucks, 500,000 jeeps, 286,000 aircraft, 86,000 tanks, 14,400 naval and merchant vessels, 41 billion rounds of ammunition, and 2.6 million machine guns that constituted two-thirds of the Allies' war supplies.

Now the debate about whether or not the quote arsenal of democracy is up to the task today is one of the central defense policy issues of the 2020s.

For example, a key argument made by Ukraine-aid skeptics like previous guest Elbridge Colbury for prioritizing Asia over Europe is the belief that America doesn't have the inherent manufacturer potential it possessed during the 1939-1941 pre-war period.

And as I discussed with Elate Ackerman last week, the defense-industrial base has shown that it's been strained to its near limits during the Russo-Ukrainian War.

I'm going to put out forward-facing episodes on the manufacturing challenge, but I thought it was a good time to take a step back and look at the overall context from which this debate emerges.

I also cannot recommend enough Greg's other writing, especially *The Age of Radiance*, *The Epic Rise and Dramatic Fall of the Atomic Era*, *Rocket Men*, *The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon*, and *Pearl Harbor from Infamy to Greatness*.

Huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the podcast's work. Hope you all enjoy this episode.

Greg Nelson, welcome to the realignment.

Thank you so much for having me. It's such a pleasure.

Yeah, I'm really glad to speak with you. There was some perfect timing with the publication of this book. We just did an episode on the Truman committee looking at American industry during World War II. So there's a nice, convenient, all the publishers got together to publish these things in May going, going on.

Well, actually, this book started off with some military analysts mentioning, you know, battlefield logistic strategy for lunch.

And this was literally the opposite of all of military history that's ever been published, which is all this general said this and this Admiral said that.

So that really intrigued my interest.

And then right after that, I learned about Abraham Lincoln's awful arithmetic, which is his idea that because the Union was more better supplied than the Confederacy, the Confederates

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could win battle after battle after battle,  
but in the long run, they would lose the war.  
And I sort of put these together with the current trend  
of history of seeing that the secret weapon of World War II  
was the arsenal of democracy.  
And in the end, I'm having to write this huge book, right?  
I was just going to write a little one, but oh, well, there we go.  
And just to clarify, because that's really interesting,  
when you mean his terrible math, you  
don't mean that the math was off.  
It was just that the implications at a moral level  
are terrible when it came to the really horrific fighting  
in 1862 base degree through 64.  
Is that a way of understanding what you're saying?  
Yeah, see, it's a fantastic conversation  
of two of Lincoln's secretaries.  
And they're very upset because the Union has lost battle  
after battle.  
And one of them says, you know, Lincoln believes in something  
called the awful arithmetic, which  
is that you can lose battle after battle,  
but if you're supplied better than your opponent,  
you're eventually going to win.  
So it doesn't actually matter how many battles you lose.  
It's only if you can hold out to the end.  
How does that conception we will get into the book  
shape how you understand military history?  
If we're talking about courage, we're  
talking about individual leadership,  
we're talking about statesmanship.  
This is just aside from the great man of history cliché.  
If we're reducing, we're not just  
reducing this to industrial output,  
but it seems like this is like the deeply,  
that's sort of depressing.  
I don't know, basically, how do you think about that?  
Well, it wasn't depressing when it gives people hope  
during terrible situations if they believe that in the end,  
they can win.  
So in both World War II and the Civil War,  
there was a period at the beginning  
that was just one piece of bad news after the next.  
And in World War II, the Japanese

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thought they were going to win because they had this Bushido philosophy of never say die and never surrender.

And the Germans thought they were going to win because they had this Prussian military history of precision and engineering and all these other things.

And the Americans thought they would win because they had the most trucks.

And it's only depressing if you don't like trucks.

So the trucks won.

Yeah, and it's depressing if you are not also allied with the United States in the context of 20th century history.

So here's what I'd love to know first.

Why write this book, tell this story now?

Because obviously, this takes five years of research.

And in this moment, specifically, if you just Google speaking to listeners here, the words, you know, arsenal of democracy, you'll get a bunch of articles about the war in Ukraine.

But obviously, that war in Ukraine did not start when you started your research.

So what were you looking at?

And let's say, also, this is before COVID too.

So as the focus on supply chains in industry, what were you seeing in 2017 and 2018

that made this the next story you wanted to tell?

So the original idea was that if the secret weapon to winning World War II is, as many people think,

the arsenal of democracy, telling the story of World War II from a completely domestic production viewpoint completely gives you a whole new way of looking at it.

So there was this entirely fresh way of looking at it.

And then as I started researching more,

I started realizing that that wasn't really the story.

The real story was how America, that was out of America, people at each other's throats fighting over their political differences,

could put aside those differences

and come together and defeat both the Great Depression and Adolf Hitler.

And how did that happen?

Because this story really begins when Roosevelt comes into office, it's 33.

A quarter of the nation is unemployed.

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People are starving to death.  
They're literally going through the dumps, getting food,  
picking food out of the dumps to eat.  
And they're really hopeless.  
And they're very bitter about World War I.  
They completely slashed their military  
so that we're 14th in size in the world.  
The American military is between Portugal and Bulgaria.  
The Norfolk, Virginia,  
which now has the biggest naval base in the world,  
at that time had a sign in it,  
Park saying no dogs or sailors.  
And when our military was trained,  
the Air Force dropped bags of flowers  
because they couldn't afford to drop real bombs.  
And those were called Betty Crocker bombs.  
And kids were trained as snipers using broomsticks  
instead of actual rifles.  
And if you were in a tank crew,  
you sometimes had to perform like,  
you had to perform without any tank at all.  
You had to march down the road,  
in formation like you were in a tank.  
And then other people were trained  
using least good humor trucks.  
So you just see this sort of,  
it's really America at its worst moment.  
And how that dramatically changes is the book.  
And I guess something I'm curious about,  
there's been a couple of books written  
about this arsenal of democracy, industry space.  
And I think what your book adds to the literature  
is combining 1933, 1938 and 1941,  
as in there's two different versions of FDRs presidency.  
Obviously there's the New Deal version  
and then there's the World War II version.  
Explain why they're tied together.  
I'm just bringing this up  
because I work at a center right think tank as a fellow.  
And I'm just deeply aware of the fact  
that there are lots of conservatives  
who are very deeply comfortable  
with the FDR of 1941 onwards.

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You're talking about industry,  
you're talking about production,  
Ronald Reagan very much likes this FDR,  
but then they're also not comfortable with 1933,  
New Deal FDR.  
So tie those two FDRs together.  
Right.  
So what happened in 33 is that FDR decided  
he's just gonna try everything he can think of  
to try and fix the depression.  
And one of the things that starts working  
is a coordinated effort between Washington and businessman.  
And it's the NRA.  
But the NRA becomes almost the joke  
of over-regulation loving bureaucrats in Washington.  
It collapses under the weight of its own regulation.  
It's declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.  
But underneath that was a relationship  
between business and government  
of the government is providing capital,  
providing research for money for research,  
providing underlying things that government,  
that the industry doesn't feel like it should be doing.  
And they create this dramatic partnership  
so that even long before World War II,  
there's an influx of corporate leaders into Washington.  
They're called Dollar a Year Men  
because they forego their civil service salary.  
And they show up and they start helping out with things.  
And the big guy who shows up in 1940  
is the president of General Motors, Bill Knudsen.  
Now, if there's anybody that all American capitalists will love,  
it's Bill Knudsen.  
But Bill Knudsen, who grew up as an immigrant from Denmark,  
he arrived with \$30 in his pocket  
because he created the first bicycle  
built for two in Denmark.  
He develops, he first works for,  
he becomes a prize fighter on the docks of the Bronx,  
but he ends up working, going to school at night  
and developing an ore.  
And his company is bought by Henry Ford  
and he rises to the Ford presidency

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and then the presidency of GM.  
And he's the one who basically interprets the new deal for World War II and establishes the arsenal of democracy. And the thing that comes from that too is that, and this is in the title of the book, so it's pretty obvious, but you make the point that we should understand this 1933 to 1941 period is constituting a revolution in America in the sense that we think of obviously 1776 as a revolution, but also the Civil War is a revolution when it comes to ending slavery and reconciling North and South. So let's just start with a definitional question. Define what a revolution is under this framework. Well, if you really look at the combination of the new deal and the arsenal of democracy as one program, the new deal built things like the Hoover Dam, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Lincoln Tunnel, the Tennessee Valley Authority. Without all of that infrastructure, we could have never defeated Hitler. We needed that buildup. And then it provided experience for both federal bureaucrats and business leaders to work with each other, all of which became part of the arsenal of democracy. But the revolution is if you take what America was like in 1933, which is totally beaten down, frightened, hopeless, and bitter, really angry and bitter about what their life was like. And what they were like in 1945, which is the top of the world, the home of the United Nations, a military force that can keep World War III from happening, an incredible economic boom, the beginning of consumer society, the beginning of the middle class. If you look at all these things, really the Roosevelt administration turned the nation upside down to make that happen. And the American people did it themselves. They turned themselves upside down and became almost wildly as confident

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at the end of that period  
as they were lacking in confidence  
at the start of that period.  
And that's really the transformation.  
It's the American people coming together  
and doing this that was revolutionary.  
As a historian, I'm curious if you have a zoomed out  
theory of revolutions and why they do or do not happen.  
Just giving this context is interesting.  
I think the 21st century has been full  
of preemptively proclaimed revolutions  
or the sense of that, you know,  
not 11 is going to completely transform  
how we think about things.  
The 2008 financial crisis,  
we're going to reimagine capitalism,  
occupy Wall Street, COVID, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.  
What specific combination of events, individuals,  
and just circumstances, and maybe just chance  
is maybe necessary for that to happen?  
Because you kind of see the ingredients  
of what could have happened,  
given the way I described things,  
like there's a word we're after 9-11,  
we reimagine what national service looks like,  
this, this, this, and that.  
How do you think about this issue?  
Well, I think about the revolution  
because I wrote a biography of a founding father  
named Thomas Paine,  
and he wrote a pamphlet called Common Sense,  
where he had to talk Americans out of being Britons  
and into being Americans.  
And at that time, the word American was a slur,  
it meant Hillbilly Cracker.  
So to do this was quite an achievement.  
So you can say to me, the revolution happens  
because it's supported by a great majority of the population.  
It doesn't, it may start from the top,  
but it's supported by, it isn't imposed on anybody.  
People believe it.  
So the change in the Civil War came  
because of Uncle Tom's cabin,

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the change in the American Revolution came because of Common Sense, and the change in World War II came when people really started feeling like if they worked together and solve things with an integrated United States, they could do incredible things. And they first felt this way in the New Deal, and they felt it again for World War II. So it happened sort of twice. Yeah, I'm glad you brought up the need for the majority of the population to be behind you because this gets at how tricky the politics of the 1938 story you're telling here is, because very, it took a while, it took two or three years for there to be majorities in favor of preparedness, in favor of like lead lace, getting rid of the neutrality acts, et cetera, et cetera. So just talk about, I'll actually ask you why I'm referencing 1938 as the relevant year in this period. So from 1938, describe the political situation and the awkward politics that FDR had to navigate. Right, so World War I, which was then called the Great War, not only left everyone who lost bitter, it left everyone who won bitter too. The Americans felt like Wilson had lied to them, President Wilson had lied to them, and all the benefits he had promised coming out of World War I didn't happen at all. And they were really angry that the foreign countries, their foreign allies owed us billions of dollars, which they were not paying back. The Great Depression was in full force. People were really angry and hostile. They were constantly raising tariffs to keep out foreign products, which just screwed up the world economy more and more. And they were really in this downward spiral. And first, so the Roosevelt administration tried all these things to fix the depression, and they fixed a great many things,

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but they had trouble with unemployment.  
Unemployment remained at double digits.  
And in 1938, France and England  
gave pieces of Czechoslovakia to Hitler  
to try and get him to stop being on the warpath in Europe.  
And Roosevelt was very upset by this.  
He thought this was terrible policy.  
And he decided the answer was  
to boost American airplane manufacturing,  
both to provide defense for America  
in the form of warplanes,  
and to sell to England and France.  
And the military said, what are you talking about?  
You think we can make 10,000 planes  
to your out of your mind?  
Because at that point, I think the active Air Force  
was something like 300 planes.  
That was, and he was saying,  
he wanted 10,000 produced a year.  
So he actually created this program  
under the secretary of the treasury in 38  
to boost airplane manufacture,  
very much like a New Deal program.  
They provided monies to different people  
to rebuild factories and it was tremendously successful.  
They immediately started boosting airplane production.  
They immediately dramatically improved our own Air Force  
and they're making good money selling it to England and France.  
And when American businessmen in the know started seeing this,  
they started getting on board.  
So that's where the really the beginning  
of the very first glimpse of the arsenal of democracy  
is 38, three years before Pearl Harbor.  
You know, it's interesting  
because when you're talking about post-Great War pessimism  
and malaise on the American people's part,  
another side of that story is a deep dissatisfaction  
with arms manufacturers.  
And that category, this is everything from, you know,  
the famous pamphlets about conspiracies to just this idea  
of like they all benefit and we didn't benefit.  
So I'm curious, how should we understand  
the positive historical, even like contemporary perception

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of industry and business and government working together versus the way that it was interpreted post-World War I and then even today.

Because another way, this was controversial at the time as you write, obviously, you know, on the one hand, it's great you have these dollar a year men who are taking a dollar to work, but oftentimes they're still paid by their employers and they're also accused of giving contracts to their buddies within the industry.

So how was this able to be basically combined together without like provoking a crony capitalistic backlash?

As you can imagine in lots of different contexts.

Well, in that particular case, I think it was when the, with the fall of France in 1940,

Americans suddenly realized Hitler could show up here and we aren't ready for it and he could just take over.

And so the fear of that grossly outweighed the fear of crony capitalism, but you're absolutely right.

That is something to be worried about at almost all times.

But if you're facing an existential threat,

I think they threw that out the window.

But also, you know, there was something that is really different.

I mean, one of the things that I loved about doing this book was ending up with how many things mirror our life right now.

Like then in the 1930s, Silicon Valley was Detroit and Detroit was considered this genius of manufacturing and the future was Detroit.

And you almost can see almost word for word, Ford was like Apple.

And then the biggest retailer was Sears and it was just like Amazon.

But one of the things that's really different between now and then is that the two biggest fighters on joining the war or staying out of it,

Franklin Roosevelt and Charles Limburg, spoke to each other, but through the radio,

which was the internet of the 30s radio,

but they alternately spoke to about policy.

And you would have this, it was called the Great Debate and it was very vicious.

People would end up brawling in the streets over it.

It was really a really scary time in a lot of ways.

But the American public could listen to this debate on the radio

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and watch how policy was made and really take part in it.  
They could say by voting and by polls,  
and Roosevelt was the first president to really use public polling,  
they could say that way they could direct how things were going.  
Did they think Roosevelt was right?  
Did they think Lindbergh was right?  
And this is something we don't have now,  
where the two opposing parties talk past each other to their own base  
instead of publicly debating each other on issues.  
So I hope that this book helps bring back that trend.  
Well, yeah, that actually brings to mind  
something that's so interesting as your,  
because the key thing, obviously, FDR's name is in the title,  
but so many of the actors, especially on the individual side,  
especially on the industry side, are often Republicans who and many,  
especially first half of FDR's presidency context would be opposed to him.  
There's a very intense bipartisan sheen to that project.  
His opponent in 1941, DeWilde,  
and the end ends up becoming a pivotally important figure  
in the preparedness debates after that election.  
What is basically this?  
Go back to your point that when the stakes are just high,  
we can be more confident in the fact that the folks  
will sort themselves in better faith than often today.  
Well, also, it's from the fact that Roosevelt was a political animal  
and he really did this stuff.  
So when in the middle of the GOP having its national convention,  
he appoints two huge GOP figures to Secretary of Defense  
and Secretary of the Navy, Knox and Stimson.  
And Knox was like running as vice president against Roosevelt  
in the previous election.  
And Stimson was Secretary of State under many Roosevelt,  
excuse me, Republican administrations.  
So that he did this right as they were having their convention  
and take away all of their point  
and make it seem like he was reaching out  
to the other team and doing all this.  
But this is what he did all the time.  
He had a very bipartisan operation going on in the cabinet  
and he would deliberately go out of his way  
to reach out to the opposition.  
And frankly, when Charles Lindbergh first came  
to public power making political commentary,

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he tried to get Lindbergh to give it up  
by offering him the position of Secretary of the Air Force  
that would be a cabinet secretary as powerful as Warren Navy.  
So it was really an operator, Roosevelt.  
And that's probably why he drove some people crazy.  
And I'm going to ask you a very niche question  
that most listeners are going to tune out from.  
I read the line about how they were going to make  
the Air Force Secretary equal to Secretaries of the Navy.  
And Army, obviously the Marine Corps is within the Navy.  
So that's why there's not a Secretary of the Marine Corps.  
But at the time, there wasn't an independent Air Force.  
So there was the Army Air Corps.  
So how would that have worked?  
That was just my thought.  
I was like, wait, like how could you have, if the Air Force was on?  
I guess what I'm asking is how would that have worked practically  
if he was Secretary of the Air Force when there was no Air Force?  
Well, he would have moved the Air Force.  
The Air Force became an independent service  
and this would have just moved it faster.  
And it would have had its own cabinet position  
like labor and agriculture and all the other cabinet positions.  
So it was just a way of muting Lindbergh,  
but it was also bringing him into the tent.  
So all of a sudden, now he's part of the administration.  
He can't go around complaining.  
It's just interesting because as I'm sure you have,  
if you do any serious reading on military quote-unquote debates  
during the 1920s and 1930s, there are just  
deeply intensive debates about whether the Air Force should  
be independent in what's being prioritized.  
And actually, the Navy is going to focus on coastal defense  
versus the Army Air Corps.  
And it's just interesting how you see a history  
hinge point of a personality debate could have ended up  
with dramatic, dramatic, dramatic implications for something moving forward.  
So I'm glad you brought up the Detroit example  
because I'm curious when it comes to the Detroit to Silicon Valley  
equivalencies today.  
As folks are debating this new era of great power competition we're in  
and debating the meaning of the term arsenal of democracy today,  
they'll say things like Silicon Valley is like the equivalent,

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like you said, of Detroit when it comes to the US.

Now, I'm curious how seriously we could take the example,

just in the sense that like Apple, for example, is a hardware company.

So obviously, there is something adjacent to producing lots of iPhones when it comes to producing a lot of stuff.

Producing lots of iPhones, when it comes to producing munitions

or this, this or that, that Apple's working on a car.

But a lot of companies are purely digital.

So it's not deeply hardware focused.

It's not industrial in the same sense.

So can you just sort of like discuss how you understand?

You also write about technology and science, obviously.

Can you just discuss how deep we could take the metaphor?

What I'm basically insinuating here is that I just know a lot of very prominent tech founders who are incredibly successful,

who I would not suggest be appointed to the Defense Industrial Production Board if such a thing were to exist in the 2020s

because the industries aren't actually as usefully comparable in that sense.

At an economic level, they are.

But at a practical level, I'm kind of interested in what you think about that.

Well, do you think that everyone in America should be using phones made in China?

I mean, there's a certain point where having everything off-shore

since the Clinton administration is going to be a problem.

And we really need to bring at least defense industry manufacturing

needs to be back here because we can't be having the software running our bombers made by people who might be our enemy in a war.

So just to the most fundamental basis, that's where it makes sense to me.

And in World War II, Ford was an international presence.

And its German division was making stuff for the Nazis.

And its British division was making stuff for the British.

And here, Henry Ford was refusing to make bombers because he was anti-FDR.

Even though all of his divisions were making all this stuff for other people.

So I really think the analogy is perfectly a lie.

I mean, if you could get the non-Twitter Elon Musk to bring over what he knows about transportation and about Tesla to the government,

that might be a tremendous boon, you know, it just has to calm down on the vaccine stuff.

But yeah, it's because Elon, because Elon, once again, SpaceX and Tesla Elon does come to mind

because once again, you're in the case of SpaceX addressing a public policy facing issue, which is how do we get orderable launches done?

So yeah, I think that's a that's a it's not just political to say that this is separate than whatever people think about how he's running Twitter.

Because there's a very direct analog between the approach you're having to take in transportation and space to a lot of the public facing issues you're doing there.

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Right. No, I love I love SpaceX and Tesla Elon.

That's what I was trying to say.

We if we have the non the non the non Twitter Elon could be a great boon to government federal policy.

Something I'd love for you to talk about very much.

I'd love for you to talk about Charles Lindberg.

Because I'm fascinated, I think.

And from this period, I think Charles Lindberg and Joseph P.

Kennedy as kind of analogs for each other, not in terms of their backgrounds, but kind of where they find themselves very rarely.

And once again, you're the actual historian, so pushback at this isn't true.

But it seems that more often than not, very few people are just not empirically wrong about something.

It's values and it's debates and there's trade off.

So maybe this thing could have gone a different way and history just went that way.

But they weren't quite wrong.

It really seems like Joseph P. Kennedy Lindberg were actually just wrong in the sense that they are making specific claims about democracy, specific claims about the power of Nazism and fascism.

So can you just talk about and Lindberg is when you write about, I just want to, you know, first merge Joseph P.

Kennedy's memory for for for my own personal say, for my own personal say, talk about Lindberg and like what his arguments were and what he got wrong, quote unquote, when it came to this great debate.

Well, the easiest way to think of how we got wrong is to remember back to at the very start of the Ukrainian situation, what, how, how, how long many people thought Ukraine was going to last.

How, how, how fast did we all think Ukraine was going to fail and Russia was going to take over.

So just get on that bandwagon because Russia is going to win.

Right.

This was how Lindberg and Kennedy thought.

They, everyone was saying that England was going to fall in a matter of months, that the USSR was going to fall in a matter of months, that there was no way the Nazis were going to take over.

So let's, let's get in on that and, and, and make an alliance with Hitler and figure out how to live with him.

And that's what they were wrong about.

So it, but you could certainly understand at that point why they thought that way because Hitler had a fantastic propagandea operation where people really believe that this Blitzkrieg could just conquer anybody.

And when France fell, in fact, was the huge reversal in American public opinion on the war, because they really thought France was a big ally of ours.

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They really thought they had these great military and they fell in five weeks. So what was Hitler going to be able to do to us? And that was the big change. But in the middle of all this is Charles Lindbergh. So the Lindbergh story is sort of fantastic because he does do the first solo flight from New York to Paris under harrowing circumstances. He was an airmail pilot. He had no real financial support for doing this. He was doing it using celestial navigation, which he did not really know how to do. He was doing it by himself, which was a terrible idea. And he did it anyway. So the heroism of this coming to a, a depressed country like the United States was, you just can't underestimate it. It was, he was such a powerful figure in America. And he cultivated a homegrown, all American boy next to our quality that, that he was honest and direct and you can believe what he says. But he wasn't a very sophisticated person. So when his child was kidnapped and murdered, he blamed the media and he took his family to live in England. And there they meet other wealthy people who were sort of aligned with the Nazis and he gets snowed by the Nazis and into believing that they're going to take over the world and there's nothing you can do about it. So just give up right now. And he starts promoting this idea over and over and over. And this is where FDR shows up and says, cut it out and I'll make you Secretary of the Air Force, but he keeps going. And as he keeps going, he did, he decides that he, after he gets a medal from the Nazis, the American public turns against him, but he decides the way to make it up to them is by keeping them from going to war with the Nazis. And he'll be an American savior again like he was before. And he goes on this campaign and this is called the Great Debate at the time. And it's, FDR announces a policy, Lindbergh goes on and tries to defeat it. The American public listens to all of these things and they vote at polls and in the voting booth with what they want. And this is literally how step by step we go from one policy after the next to the next until we're fully supporting England and the Soviet Union with Lindbergh's. And during this whole time Lindbergh is fighting against it. But as he's fighting, he becomes more and more publicly racist and anti-semitic to the point where when Roosevelt wins his third term, the first time a president is elected to a third term, Lindbergh is quoted and he says this in his own memoirs, he prints this, that the only answer is to take voting rights away from black people and the Jews better watch out because if they think

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things are bad for them in Germany, wait till they see what can happen to them here.

So it's sort of outrageous.

But people pick up on this and they start seeing in his speeches references to things Hitler had said and this sort of crazy super racist idea at the time called eugenics, which is a hierarchy of skin color.

And they pick up on it and people start publicly attacking him over and over again and he sort of falters.

And then of course when Pearl Harbor happens, then all of his ideas are worthless.

Yeah, it's just so interesting because on the one hand, your answer to the

bipartisanship question was FDR's individual political talent was paramount.

On the Lindbergh side, his lack of political talent was paramount to how this story turns out too because he did not have to say the things that he said.

He did not have to make things.

There was plenty of enough stuff that you had to work with, to your point, the back class against the end of the Great War.

You did not have to bring Jews into it.

He did not have to fawn over Hitler and Gering.

And it's just like this deeply, I'm fascinated in the personality part of that dynamic.

I think it's pure hubris.

Go on, yeah.

I think it's pure hubris.

He just thought that he was this incredible person that he knew about many things that he didn't know about, and he didn't really get educated about it.

He didn't know what he didn't know.

He wouldn't get educated about these things.

It was quite apparent to everyone else that the Nazis couldn't attack Prague and England, which is what he originally said.

You actually see it now in high-flying billionaires today of people who don't know what they don't know.

So it repeats.

That part of history seems to repeat.

Yeah.

And this is interesting because it brings to mind a kind of a throwaway line that you had in the book.

But to me, it's deeply fascinating.

You wrote about how it'd be worth a historian delving deep into the dynamic of optimism and pessimism.

FDR and Churchill are deeply optimistic, despite all the darkness you could experience in 38 through 42.

And various leaders like Petain, Durlan, et cetera, et cetera, are pessimistic, and they have their country steamrolled rather quickly.

The part that I would just add to this story that's interesting is Churchill's an optimist if it's 1940.

But in the 1930s, he's talking about Nazis and war coming back.

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And there's actually a way of understanding everything he's saying is deeply pessimistic. And if you're looking at what Lindbergh and Joseph B. Kennedy are saying, it's kind of optimistic in the sense that put aside the thoughts about the Jews, it's optimistic in the sense of like, we're the United States.

We're between two oceans.

Whatever is happening over there can't possibly affect us like we're fine.

So can you just talk more about this like awkward dynamic of optimism and pessimism, which actually goes there's different quadrants operating at the same time?

Well, I think the quote you're saying is Sherwood, who's talking about Roosevelt and Churchill in the wake of his boss, Hopkins, who is not optimistic, but anyway, but I think that what you see is that when the going gets tough, the winners go, we can beat it.

We can do it.

And you can't ever give that up.

If you really turn sour when things are bad, you're as a world leader, you just have, you almost are guaranteeing it's going to get worse.

And that's what the optimism he was talking about, that during all of 1942, during all of 1941 for England and all of 1942 for the Allies, the news couldn't be worse.

It was just one terrible thing after the next.

And when you were around Churchill in Roosevelt, you would have no idea that this was such a terrible period.

They were just kind of like, oh, we're going to win this.

Just keep going.

No problem.

We can do that.

And I think that's the only thing you can do as a leader when you're faced with one horrible thing after another.

Joseph Kennedy never had one horrible thing after another happened.

Well, at this point in this life, I'd say the 1960s version did have one thing after another terrible happened in.

Okay.

So in this last section, I want to kind of fast forward a tiny bit, especially to the relevance to today part.

So we have spent a lot of time in the 38 through 41 period.

What you have an interesting section in the book just pointing out that the term arsenal democracy has actually a long history to it.

It's used in a bunch of different contexts.

When we discussed today, we're often referring specifically to American industrial capacity.

But when you describe the term, you're saying that FDR is referring to the quote unquote miracle of the American people.

So just kind of expand on that, like help us understand these different definitions.

Well, I think that it all goes back to what I was saying before that a revolution happens when people want it to happen.

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And they say this is, and it's almost as if the Americans had a new idea of themselves. And it was the FDR introduced them to this idea, but they really took it on themselves. And one of my favorite moments in this book, because I was able to talk about it with my parents before they died, was when FDR, and he's just throwing this line away. It's in a press conference. And he goes, imagine that your neighbor's house is on fire. And you have a nice garden hose, and his neighbor wants to use your garden hose. And then he's going to give it back to you. And if something happens to the garden hose, they'll pay for it. But it's no skin off your teeth. It's a lenient sub-garden hose. And this garden hose becomes the entire support system for France before she falls in for Britain and the USSR until Pearl Harbor. And he brings to, through the miracle of radio, the internet of the 1930s, he brings this entire sense to the American population of, yes, if we can save the British with our garden, no one else in America uses the phrase garden hose, but Roosevelt would still, if we can help England with our fine garden hose, we should do it. And he literally is able to transform what people think of themselves. And he doesn't just make everybody rich. He makes everyone ennobled. There's suddenly better people that they want to be this force for good in the world, which had never occurred to them five years before. So he really leads this sort of charge in moving things forward. And he does all of this long before Pearl Harbor. And that's what is amazing to me. So one of the things that's so amazing to read about Roosevelt is the fact that he wore this persona like a cloak that he developed. And he was this happy-go-lucky sort of a dim bulb who agreed with everybody. And not everything was great. And it was so effective that I have one quote from someone who worked for the Bureau of the Budget, and they talk about the rest of democracy, and they go, someone must have planned this and run it. Could it have been the president? And this is someone who's working there the whole time. It still doesn't understand how this happened. And can't imagine that FDR did it. That's how, that's what a political operator he was. So take us to 1945. You set it up well, which is America in the 30s. They've got 300 likely outdated fighter aircraft. They needed to do 10,000. Like what is accomplished during this period on the industrial side? The numbers are so staggering.

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It's just, it's unbelievable.

So one of my favorite moments is that there's a terrible problem with tax.

And America has produced for over 20 years, America made 33 tanks.

And so the British show up in the office of the head of the office of production management who's Bill Newton and say, we need tanks.

We need tanks.

And it doesn't know what he's going to do.

So he calls the head of Chrysler and he says, can you make us tanks?

And the head of Chrysler says, sure we can.

What is a tank?

He has no idea what a tank is.

So they send them to the armory and Chrysler eventually ends up making the Chrysler tank armory, which one factory makes more tanks than all of Germany ever made in its entire Nazi career.

And you see these numbers again and again, where 1922 to 1938, 13 tanks and 1940, 1945, 80,000 tanks.

It's almost incomprehensible to imagine how this worked.

But there was a brilliant operation in Detroit, just like Silicon Valley, where they could do this incredible stuff because they had down the method of mass production.

And they knew how to turn it into anything they could make, could be made with mass production.

And they would take a finished plane and disassemble it into all of its parts and create hundreds of pounds of blueprints illustrating every part in 3D.

And then they would create machine tools, the tools that make machines like today.

We have robots that make other robots that make other robots.

They're in manufacturing.

We have machine tools which make other tools.

And so they would be able to create this entire factory.

So it would start off very slowly and it would seem like no progress is being made.

And this would cause chaos in Washington bureaucracy and people would be fired and rehired and sent all over the place.

But once it actually started going, it was really amazing to see.

I guess the question I'd have for you then as we're nearing the end again is there's this massive contemporaneous debate that's happening in the foreign policy community, especially when it comes to the arsenal of democracy, when it comes to the war in Ukraine and possible conflict in the Asia Pacific.

There are some people who've been on this podcast before who argue that America is not the America

of 1941 and that we just can't use the example of, well, we went from 300 to 10,000.

We can do it again.

We're coming out of a period after the Cold War, deindustrialization, etc., etc., etc.

To what degree do you think America is still the America of 1941 in the sense that we could be in the dumps in the 30s, but there's just this inherent resolve and energy that could be activated with the right program?

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Well, I'm not sure how much can be done with the right program, but there certainly is a reason to bring back manufacturing in the South and the Midwest and to see what, you know, there's a reason it's called the Rust Belt, sadly, and we don't really need a Rust Belt and we don't really need a South that isn't moving forward either.

So you could change industrial, you could change federal policy to help industry in both of those areas, just as was done in the Arts of Democracy.

We're doing it somewhat with the CHIPS Act and somewhat with the infrastructure bills, but I think really it's time for a better business-government relationship and it's time for America industry to get off its feet and not offshore everything.

So I don't know that we need to do it for the Arts of Democracy, but I think we need to do it for our own economy and our future.

The closing question, which I'm just curious to ask you as a historian, is there a tie that brings together all of your work, like a thread you've written about Pearl Harbor, you've written about the moon landing, you're writing about the, you know, nuclear industry and nuclear energy? Is there like a tie, do you have like a approach you take or do you just take stories that you find interesting and have some aspect of, you know, science and industry tied to them?

The tie is the fact that I write about great big huge turning points and whether or not it's done through a very sharp focus like I did with the Doolittle Raid or whether it's a broad focus like the history of the nuclear age from Marie Curie to Fukushima, you know, it's taking these giant turning points and it's looking at who are the people who've been forgot. So it's bringing back people in this book, like Jean Munday, who was this French salesman who just shuttled around from France and then France's law, so he moves to England and then Churchill hates him, so he comes to America and he's the one who said that if the United States fully unleashes his industrial power, it is the only thing that can defeat Hitler.

He's really the idea behind the Arsenailles and all of that about him has been forgotten.

We now only know him. If anyone knows him at all, he's known as one of the founders of the European

Union. So all of that work is forgotten. There are three economists who worked for the federal government who figured out exactly how much the economy could do, how much manufacturing could

do, how you could support both civilians and the military and they produced this gigantic thing called the victory plan and they were completely forgotten. So bringing back these people who are forgotten is a great spiritual endeavor for me and helping people read a page turning kind of a book that you could read for a weekend that explains a giant turning point in American history. So these are my two highlights of my life. I think that's an excellent place to leave us.

Craig, this has been incredibly fun. I really enjoyed the book. The book is V for Victory, Franklin, Roosevelt's American Revolution and the triumph of World War II. Thank you for joining me

on The Realignment. This was fantastic, Marshall. Thank you so much. It was an honor to be here.

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membership. Great. See you all next time.