

Marshall here. Welcome back to the Realignment.

Hey everyone, welcome back to the show. Quick note, last Friday Saga and I released our most recent Q&A AMA exclusively for Supercast subscribers, so if you'd like to get access to that full audio and submit questions for future episodes, go to realignment.supercast.com onto today's episode. My guest today is Ben Terrace. He is a writer in the Washington Post style section focusing on national politics and he's the author of a new book, *The Big Break, The Gamblers, Party Animals, and True Believers*, trying to win in Washington while America loses its mind. I've been pumped to have been on the show ever since I first saw this book announced earlier in the year, especially because of the fact that it really focuses on a topic that is near and dear to this podcast heart, which is the idea that DC and the broader American political scene changed after 2016 and it takes that idea and focuses on individuals and institutions across the left-right and center that tried to make a series of gambles and bets in the policy category or even the political category based on that idea. So you're going to see people everywhere from the Sam Bankman-Freed political scene to young staffers who are involved in Diane Feinstein's office to progressives who also are trying to play the inside game as well in opposition to this sort of outside the Beltway strategy that Bernie Sanders took. This once again for me is interesting because in my way, my response to the Trump era was to create a podcast. So it's cool to take a break from that and actually look at folks who deeply integrated themselves and participated in everyday events as they built out. A lot of different takeaways. This conversation is going to go over to different places, but I cannot recommend this book enough especially if you're interested in the realignment idea. Hope you all enjoy this conversation and of course, huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the work of this podcast. Ben Terrace, welcome to the realignment. Thanks so much for having me. Yeah, I'm so pumped to talk with you about your new book, *The Big Break*. We're just discussing this before the interview, but I really think that a show called *The Realignment*, which really came out in the wake of Donald Trump's election in 2016, has to engage with this topic because this is really just a central issue. How much did Washington change? Was what Washington turned into? Where's the book came before? Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So let's just ask you the first question. Having written this book, what would you say in June 2023 is the quote-unquote problem with Washington? Oh man, the one problem with Washington. That's a really hard question to answer because it seems like there's a lot of problems with Washington. I think one of the big problems is nobody's really figured out how to do anything right now. I mean, after Donald Trump, people kind of had this idea of how to run as a Democrat, how to run as a Republican, how to build coalitions, raise money. That was when Donald Trump was around. And with him gone, everyone's sort of like, who are we? What are we supposed to do? And it seems like nobody's really figured out a good answer on how to get things done. And that's a problem for Washington because the whole point is to do stuff there, get things done, fix problems, I don't know, make more problems. But really, it seems like not a lot is getting done at all. Yeah, I think that's a really good narrative way of answering the question because I was just thinking back to 2008 when I first started getting engaged with politics that really just, we've had this hyper-disruptive period in American political life. Barack Obama,

upends Hillary Clinton, the Democratic primary. He becomes the president. And you have Trump, then Biden in 2020. And I feel as if each part of this era have had specific critiques of Washington. So I just find it interesting that your articulation is, in the wake of the Trumpian moment, no one, quote unquote, has really figured out how to get anything done. So who are the players then?

How should we understand not the 2019 players? So this isn't like a battle between like socialists and populists, like never Trumpers. That's not quite as much of like a relevant framework.

Who would you say are the players right now? Well, in the book that I wrote, the idea that I had was, so it's called the big break, right? And it's kind of a two-part meeting. One is the country went through a big break, this kind of big moment that changed the way we see politics, we see ourselves.

And then it kind of created this new landscape, this new, almost like frontier, where there's a whole lot of people who are coming to Washington to seek out their big breaks, right? And so that's a lot of new people. A lot of people trying to figure out how to do things slightly differently and pitch themselves as we are the saviors of democracy or we know how to win elections or we know how to raise money or whatever. And then there's a lot of people who have been around for a long time who had to figure out new ways to do things. And so the kinds of folks I focus on in the book are people like Matt Schlapp, who was a big time Donald Trump supporter.

He's one of these guys that has been in Washington for such a long time that he's taken on so many different shapes, went from a Bush political director in the White House, establishment guy to becoming a Trump guy. And the reason I was interested in him is it felt like that, if I could figure out his story, I could figure out how a lot of people in the Republican Party in Washington kind of became who they were, somebody who didn't like Trump to somebody who supported him intently. And on the Democratic side, there were people who had just as much kind of shapeshifting going on, someone like Sean McElwee, the Democratic pollster who ran an organization called Data for Progress, who went from an abolish ICE Bernie Sanders guy to a Elizabeth Warren kind of pragmatist lefty to a Biden centrist kind of type. These are the people who are trying to figure out where the influence is, where the power is, where the energy is, and they kind of move towards it. So I've got a two part question here that stems from what you just said. So part one, I asked this to Mark Lebowitz when he came on back in July, why does someone talk to you? The reason why this is such a compelling book, and I'm sure the audible will be fun too in that sense is you're not just sort of like sitting up in the rafters saying like, oh, like Matt Schlapp does this thing. So I assume he does like, you know, you're actually talking with people, you're really getting in depth with them. I don't understand why people think it's in their best interest to go as in-depth as they did here. I get like an Atlantic profile. I get, you know, we go back and forth, we have a coffee. I don't get months and months and months and months of stuff. So that's the first part. So answer that. Why would someone talk to you?

Yeah, I mean, it's a good question. And I think there's lots of different answers for it. I think ultimately, and I hope this is true, that one of the reasons that people talk to me is even if they don't like it at the end, if they don't like the story, the profile, the book, their portrayal, I think people recognize that I'm fair, that I'm giving them time to explain themselves.

I'm trying to get the complexities and the nuance of their story and their ideology and why they do

what they do. And I think people want to be able to tell their story in a complex and thoughtful and, you know, extended way. Most people only, if they ever get written about, it's like one quote. And, you know, you look for the most outrageous thing, and that's sort of what people are recognized

for. So I think one part of it is that people respect that I'm trying to understand them. And that means something to a lot of people. I think there are also a lot of people in Washington who are desperate to become characters, right? Even if they might become a bad character, even if they may be seen as villains to some, you know, there are people who want influence, fame, they want to have a brand. Being in a book, being in an article can help with that, sure. And the other thing is, in a project like this book, you know, when I start talking to people, they can be in one situation, right? Like take Sean McAlee, who we just mentioned. Why wouldn't he want to talk to me in that moment? When I first got to know him, he was on the rise. He was a democratic operative who,

you know, had the whole, had his future in front of him. The White House was tweeting out his polls, he was meeting at the White House, he was getting huge clients like John Federman. Like he was, you know, on cloud nine, why not talk to somebody and get that story told? But because it's a book and because it is a long commitment, people's stories can change. And so they're sort of on the line at that point. And when things get bad, I'm still there, I get to watch it, I get to see it, I get to get reaction to it. And it's kind of hard to push me away at that point because they want to be able to shape their story. And so for a book, I really got to spend a lot of time with people because even when things got bad, they kind of knew that they were, you know, on the journey

with me at that point. Yeah. And I guess this leads to the second part of your earlier answer. When you're talking about, you're speaking with Matt Schlapp, you're kind of understanding like what is going through his mind? Like how did the environment shape him from being a Bush political operative to a very, very Trumpy guy? How complicated are these stories actually? So for example, like when you gave the Matt Schlapp example, the very easy Matt Schlapp example, which doesn't require someone to read a book is, okay, Mitt Romney, if Mitt Romney had won in 2012,

Matt Schlapp would be a whole other different person. Because at the end of the day, Matt Schlapp is a part of a DC political class that ultimately exists to service principles and main players. So because Donald Trump won in 2016, obviously Matt in a way that let's say a more conventional Republican might not have worked, it's not a shocker that Matt Schlapp would direct himself more towards Trump, especially when they were as, I don't mean financial incentive in the corruption sense, just in the sense of like, okay, when your party's in power, you're going to get more clients like this, this is that. So like, how complicated is the story? Am I oversimplifying it? No, I mean, I think that is, that is basically the motivations behind why people act a certain way. And it does explain a large part of how Washington works. But as a writer, as a person who is interested in like the human condition, I kind of was curious, like, what that looked like, what did it actually mean to go to go through that process to have to do the mental gymnastics in your own head to convince yourself that what I'm doing is ideologically pure or ethically pure, or what I'm doing is good, is more good than bad. And, you know, when you take somebody and you can say this is what their motivation is, this explains why they do that.

Sure. But like, what does that actually mean? What does it actually mean to see up close? And I found it fascinating. And the way that in which it affected his relationships at work, the way that it affected his relationships with people he's known in Washington forever, almost family-like, connections, how he changed the way he talked about things and thought about things and the grievance that he felt about this and that. Seeing it up close was like, oh, this is what Washington can do to people. It's kind of fascinating. Yeah. And I think the other question that kind of comes to mind there is, to what degree do you think ideas matter here? Because perfect example. So I'm saying this as a fellow to think, take you also podcasts on the side in this way. What's sort of depressing here is how central just personality, brand, etc., are in many parts of the story. Because once again, if the story here is that Sean McElwee is able to go from abolish ice guy on Twitter to Elizabeth Warren stand to Joe Biden person, I think one could say like, okay, like he's just sort of cynical and he's just sort of moving up. But on the other hand, the more hopeful side of me is like, that's actually a pretty logical step change. You're looking at a 2018 cycle where Twitter is just everything where, okay, Trump won the Trump won election. So the Overton Windows were expanded. But let's see what we could say. Let's see what we could do. Okay, it's 2020. He's like a smart, educated person. Obviously, he's going to lean more towards Elizabeth Warren in terms of the actual Democratic primary. He totally makes sense there for demographic perspective. And then if Joe Biden, okay, Joe Biden won, it turned out that there wasn't a big voting base for Medicare for all in terms of the actual party. So obviously, Sean would kind of go there, help me kind of unpack like my, I guess, I just see both sides of the coin there in terms of why you'd be cynical about it. No, absolutely. Look, I think that Washington is often the story of kind of warring tensions, right, between idealism and cynicism, right, where, or the desire to do good and the desire to be powerful, right? And those two things aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. You can become powerful to do good. You can do lots of good and become powerful. And so there are plenty of people who look at Sean, who don't like him even as a, you know, as a personality and can say, well, yeah, but he was, you know, I think that his tactics were good. He was trying to advance Democratic principles using the best possible path that he had at any given moment. And, you know, for this book, I talked, among other people, I talked to his ex-girlfriend, which is a strange thing to do, but he actually put me in touch with her. So I didn't feel quite as strange about it. And she told me, you know, they'd been dating, they dated for seven years before they broke up. She thought that she knew him pretty much better than anyone. And even she couldn't tell, which was a bigger motivation for him, the desire to become influential and famous and powerful, or the desire to do lots of good in the world. And so she was conflicted about, you know, the work he did because she could see both sides too. And so I think that is interesting because, A, it's an interesting story about a person, but also it really gets to the heart of Washington where if it becomes a place that everyone sees as just cynical, even if the end results could be good, I don't know. I mean, it becomes a place that people think of as the swamp and you can run against it. You can become president just by saying drain the swamp. You can, you know, keep things from happening because you point out all the cynicism and then all that cynical stuff that could lead to good is actually leading to bad. Yeah. And that actually brings to mind the obvious question that the book really gets to.

How much, I don't just mean in terms of Donald Trump being either true to his word about drain the swamp or being a hypocrite. I mean, in a literal level, how much did things actually change after 2016? I mean, like at a structural ecosystem level, because the reason why I'm fascinated by that question is so many people are incentivized at an institutional or brand level to say everything's different. So if I'm launching a new podcast in 2019 and I'm trying to raise money from donors as a nonprofit, I'm incentivized to say like, Oh yeah, donors, I'm 27. Why would you give money to a 27 year old or not a 40 something who has broadcast experience? Because everything's different now. The world has changed.

Therefore,

body, body, body, body, body. So as someone who very much went through that process is kind of like struggle without the past few years, I'm just aware of the fact that every player in this story is incentivized to even you to start to a certain degree trying to sell a book, which has the new normal on the back of it. So what's just like unpack this? Like how much is 20, let's say 2019 through 2023 different than 2014?

Well, I mean, look, it's it's hard to quantify, obviously. I think the thing about Trump is he did two things. I think he did change a lot of Washington a in the moments that he was around, the place was very different if for no other reason, because of the people who are running the shows, right? The people who are put in charge of, you know, everything from the secretaries of state to every person in the cabinet to the people who are underlings in all these departments, that was different, right? To have people that wouldn't normally be in Washington running, Washington did feel different. But I do also think that Trump revealed a lot of things that were always true about Washington, right? Like this idea that he was completely antithetical to what Washington stood for seems kind of silly to me, right? Like he was a showman, he was ideologically malleable. He, you know, thought all press was good press.

These are things that people have been doing in Washington for a long time, and it can be successful, right? So I think, yeah, he changed the place and it's become kind of a, I don't know, flimsier version of itself, because people have decided to, I don't know, resemble Trump in certain ways. But also, I think that he was kind of revealing, you know, a central truth about the place to begin with.

But yeah, the phrase, but only more so, comes to mind in terms of the way you're, the way you're describing it. So another category that becomes interesting here is just the, let's just put it like the institutional level. So like you're looking at like the lobbying industry, you're looking at specific like institutions within DC. To what degree did the Trump era change these institutions? So like, if I'm a big lobbyist, how is my specific work seen or just operationalized differently than it did before Trump? You know, in a lot of ways, lobbying kind of reverted to what it always was, right? I talked to the one very successful lobbyist who came in as a Trump guy, and he wanted to shake the place up. And he sort of got himself into trouble by taking on clients that he didn't, you know, ended up looking not so good for him. And by the time I talked to him, as the Trump years were won, you know, as the Trump years had wound down, and it was the beginning of the Biden years, he had started hiring democratic lobbyists, and he was trying to make his shop look like the shops of old. And so he was telling me, he's like, look, I came in as a change agent, and in some ways Washington sort of changed me into, you know, the mold that

has always fit here. And so I think Washington can feel different because a lot of new faces are around, and they maybe do things slightly differently, they maybe talk slightly differently, they maybe, you know, have campaign, like campaign on issues or campaign on elections slightly differently. But they're going to take a lot of the same lessons that every lobbyist has ever taken in Washington, because the way you're successful is you get people from both sides to agree to something, and you slip stuff into bills, and you make money for your clients. And that sort of, you know, it's fundamental. Yeah, it's really funny, because I love you giving the example of at the end of the Trump presidency, he's having to hire democratic lobbyists, because that's a perfect example of how you can have the character we're talking about is definitely Maverick.

He's doing these unconventionally, like I love your, you know, chapter on him, like, you know, escaping, you know, Belarus during the start of the Ukraine war, like that's definitely not a normal thing that's happening if you're a, you know, VB HBO era 2014 lobbyists, but at the same time, you're still operating within a DC structure, which is okay, sometimes your party's out of power. And if you only hire Mavericks, and you're trying to actually get things done for your clients, because oftentimes the client asks aren't particularly ideological, they're very practical, it's I need this done. And you could say like, the world has changed all you want, but that won't matter if they can't actually get the deal done. So that just gets to, I think, a good point about how the structure versus balancing. Okay, so here's another, I want to really dive into this human condition aspect of your writing, because I really want folks who purchased the book to think about this that way, you really work a lot with the gambling metaphor. So obviously, Sean McAuley is literally gambling. This plays a huge role in his downfall, the data for progress, he's gambling, he's, he's pulling, he's working for clients, but he's also placing bets that oftentimes are not in alignment with his actual like data work. What's put that to the side for a second, you even in the back cover expand the gambling metaphor, I'm just kind of explain like what is like the persona who saw the 2016 to 2021 moment and said, I'm going to gamble versus the person, and this is more me, this is my podcast, you're not an activist, who's like, I'm just going to sit back and talk to people and see what's up, like distinguish the personalities maybe. Yeah, I mean, look, Washington

is made up of lots of different kinds of people. There's this idea that it's only filled with, you know, brand hungry influence peddlers who, you know, want to be rich and famous and there are plenty of people like that. But you know, there are a lot of people who also come and just try to do the work and do good and pass legislation and, you know, do long ruling hours. And I'm, you know, the book has some of them in it too, right? Like this is not just a book about people who are desperate for attention. But the people who are the people who want to be influential, like they kind of have to take a risk, right? You can't just be there and hang around and kind of do like a middling job or never be early, you know, just always be on time. You have to, you have to be very early sometimes, right? And that means like betting on Trump when it looks like he's not going to win. And if he does win, you're the guy who bet on him early and all of a sudden, you know, you're a match lap and you live in literally the largest house on mansion drive in Virginia. And CPAC, the conference that he hosts is like, you know, a big Trump rally every year and it rakes in tons and tons of money and you're successful, right? If he had been late on that, many would have just been another guy like doing fine enrollment

politics. The same is true for the lobbyist you mentioned who, you know, was trying to get, was trying to get a contract with the Belarusian dictator at the start of war. That's a gamble in a lot of ways, both, you know, reputationally, but also if he could get it and he could make a ton of money, he'd be the guy who did this one thing. And so I think Washington is this sort of filled with gamblers because, you know, you're trying to win elections, you're trying to pass bills or, you know, find yourself whispering into the ears of powerful people. And the only way to do that is if you're willing to take big risks. The other thing that's interesting when you were giving that answer is this is also an era where, era, Freudian slip, this is also an era, era, I'll keep that in the episode, an era where a lot of the institutions that a normal DC striver could have climbed their way up and just are not as functional. In many ways, like the congressional like committee process and offices don't have the same amount of power that they used to. There's definitely a world where if you'd written the vertigo book in the 1980s or 1990s, you'd focus more on like the RNC or the DNC. You'd focus more on the official structures to tell the story of DC. Now, so I guess, you know, that's the side of things which is kind of a little absent from the story, obviously. But what was happening like off the page? Like, how do you think of the RNC and the DNC and the traditional, we're not shaking the boat, think tank space as you're like writing these types of people? I mean, those things don't matter, right? That's still a lot of the internal organs of Washington. But so much about how Washington has changed since Trump is kind of in the influence of outsiders, right? I mean, Trump was this outsider who came in and got to be president. And people realize, okay, well, I don't have to necessarily go through the traditional, you know, structures to get power. And so that can mean fundraising in your own organization. It can mean starting something new. It can mean, you know, starting your own polling organization instead of going and learning from a bigger polling shop and being part of the, you know, number one of one of three big polling shops that do all the work, you try to, you know, find your own space. And I think that is a new thing in Washington. I mean, it's always been there. There's always been some people try to do something new. But the new thing now is kind of building up your own thing. And part of that is built on your own personality and brand and, you know, kind of being out there. And this is for the clickbait part of the audience, you obviously need to talk about Sam Bakeman Freed and how he, like, comes into the store. So I'll ask this question on two different levels. So the first level is, tell us about Sam Bakeman Freed, like, how does he intersect the story of Sean McElwee? And then, of course, I'm sure you just woke up in November, and you were like, okay, the story just escalated in terms of the significance. Like, if I think of the status quo continue, you've been like, there's this shlubby guy in his 30s who likes politics and he funds Sean. And that's different. He likes pandemic stuff versus now. So yeah, just answer those two questions, however you want to do it. Yeah, well, I mean, so what we were talking about at the beginning of this was people were all sort of like looking for, I had lots of questions and we're looking for answers after Trump was gone, right? Like, it was easy to raise a ton of money as a Democrat before Donald, while Donald Trump was the president, because you could say, we're against this guy, you could build coalitions, you could do all that, you could do pretty much, the job was easy, because it was like, we are not that support us, and the money just came in. Sam Bakeman Freed was sort of unanswer to the question, what do we do now? This young guy with billions of dollars and was a Democrat or at least mostly wanted to support Democrats,

although maybe secretly was also funding Republicans, but mostly a Democratic donor who at one point said he might give a billion dollars in the presidential election.

That sort of was like, well, there's an answer, right? This is a guy who can help fund organizations all around Washington, news organizations, can support candidates through super PAC giving. He was a guy kind of like Wizard of Oz, like character off to the side who was kind of behind a lot of stuff. And one of the places he intersects in the book was he was behind some of the work that Sean McAuley was doing, kind of indirectly, right? So Sean, in addition to Data for Progress, was also doing consulting for a group called Guarding Against Pandemics, which is an organization that was run by Gabe Bakeman Freed, Sam's brother. And Sean kind of, it felt like he had the keys to like, the hottest car in town, like he was a guy who had a connection to this young billionaire that didn't have a lot of connections in Washington.

And as the year came to an end, on election night is when everything kind of came crashing down, both for Sean and his work side of things, which I get into a lot in the book, but also Sam Bankman Freed's FTX empire crumbles and now he's under house arrest.

And that easy fix answer to what do we do now kind of vanishes once Sam is under house arrest and has no more money to give to, you know, everyone in Washington.

Okay, you, in your answer, you kind of opened up an obvious follow up, which is I really want folks, we get a lot of audience questions of, Hey, I got to live in DC, I'm off of the beltway,

I'm on the solid quarter, help me understand how DC works. So the, your, your, your recent invocation of the phrase, like, what do we do now has a couple of different meanings.

And I'd actually like you to explain. So on the one hand, I'm sure our listeners are thinking, they're like, Oh, like, what do we do now? Like, what's our policy proposal? Like,

what's the specific idea? But at an institutional and organizational level, you're actually kind of like speaking to something. So this brings to mind,

like Leah Hunt Hendricks, and the more sort of like progressive side of things. So can you really just explain like, what the like non, do we pass the new tax bill side of the, what do we do now question is? Yeah, I mean, it's one of these kind of, I don't know, four questions that, that Democrats often go through, right? Which is like, what do we stand for? What do we want to be?

Again, it was easy when it was like we are anti Trump. And then it became, well, do we want to be, you know, the progressive who Pat, who work on, on, on this kind of thing, or do we want to be the incrementalists who just pass little things at a time? You know, one of the big kind of,

I'd say fights in the party was between people who call themselves popularists, who thought they'll just find the most popular things that are polling well and do those things, and we can win elections. And then people who thought they should be doing bigger, bolder things that maybe wasn't going to get, you know, a little bit of like from everybody, but really rally the base. And so Democrats are, you know, would struggle with this. It was how big should these bills be? How much money should we spend on this? Should we be expanding the social safety net

here? Or should we be just doing things that, you know, keep everybody happy without, you know, angering too many people on the side? You know, please, another question. Why didn't you profile, I'd say, like the Bernie side of the progressive movement? Because the thing is

you're, you're the progressives of your profiling, either like at a personal level or at a, like, where do they fit in the coalition or much more towards like the Elizabeth Warren progressive side of things? Like they're not the like Bernie populist side of things. That doesn't mean like the popularist versus like bigger, bolder things debate wouldn't have happened either way, but they are just like a different ecosystem. Like where does the Bernie side fit into this category? I feel like a lot of the Bernie side of things is like more out in the world, right? More out in outside of Washington. There are people obviously in Washington that are Bernie supporters and he

has, you know, there's lots of energy, but a lot, I feel like most of that energy is, is out in states, right? Like that is kind of the point of, of populism is it's not a Washington DC focused thing. And so Washington is often not that good at tapping into actual populist sentiment and movements because it is a little bit of a bubble. That is such a, that is unexpected, but I never thought of it that way. I guess the actual point is, and I guess this goes why, I guess this goes to a lot of the awkward dynamics in that like Elizabeth Warren versus Bernie Sanders argument in 2020,

because the Elizabeth Warren argument was Elizabeth Warren is what gets you the CFPB, Elizabeth Warren is what gets you Rohit Chopra and Lena Kahn and those sorts of people versus the Bernie sort of more like populist, revolutionary overturn the system side. Is there been, has that debate been resolved in either side's favor from your perception or is it just kind of a relevant to the way you're thinking about things? Well, I don't know. First of all, I don't think any of these questions have been resolved. I think we're just like in this very murky period where like there's more questions than answers. Like nobody really knows how to get through this post Trump, maybe pre Trump period because we're still figuring out what the hell's going on. So I don't know if it's been resolved. I think what's going to end up happening or what's happening a lot in Washington is they kind of bleed together more, right? It's not so much like this side versus this side. It's like there are people who you look at and they're kind of Bernie people and they're kind of Warren people. And those are the ones that can maybe do the best in Washington because they're taking a little bit from each side, not at war with the other side. Another question then is, why did you not I'm turning into a book editor category? Why did you not profile kind of like the new right in the sense of like the Josh Hollies, the JD Vances, those sorts of people?

Because see, the thing that's so interesting here is, operationally, while they may use populist rhetoric, like what I actually see happening in DC right now is they're much closer to the Elizabeth Warren side of things. Once again, not in the sense of like their policy prescriptions, but in terms of like their clear theory of the case. So I'm just curious, like why where you think like the new right intellectual side fits into the Trump dynamic? Because it's because once again, the key thing about match slab is that match slab and whether or not Josh Hollies like perfectly like interested in populism, the literal level, he's definitely chosen the intellectual side of things to matter at a level which match slab is just like not clearly doing. So what are outside of like the match slab Trump dynamic? Yeah, no, I think they're fascinating. Honestly, like you're talking about like kind of the NatCon movement and everything. They'd be very depressed to know that you did not profile them in this book. I know this from personal experience. Yeah. Well, maybe that's partly why I didn't want to deal with them. I mean, look, part of it was like, to me, the difference between CPAC and like a NatCon event like is not all that different. Yes,

I do think that, you know, you can talk to people who have a real ideological theory and they can get really into the weeds about things. But to me, it's sort of felt they feel like they're occupying similar spaces. Just how do we explain why we are okay with Trump or okay with this movement overall? And to have two of them just felt like it would have been overkill to me. Yeah. And once again, this is not a a tome of a thousand words getting into that. Well, this is a NatPopulous, which is actually different than a NatCon. And then there's like the Hungary and you'd have to do a trip to Hungary and that'd be a whole thing, which is which is once CPAC was going to Hungary was sort of like, okay, you know, we're we got it all. We got we're all the same here. So as we're nearing the final section here, to your point, DC, you said this earlier, DC is like a balancing act between cynicism and idealism. Does doing this work leave you optimistic or pessimistic about American politics? Yeah, both honestly. Look, I moved to Washington like, oh, my God, well, I when I first got a job in Washington, I told my then girlfriend, my now wife that we lived here for a year, and it's been like 11 years now. And so the reason I felt that way at the time was I've never been that interested in politics. Like, I care about it, obviously, I care about the direction of the country, I care about elections and legislation, the social compact, I care about all these things. But I was never one of these guys obsessed with, you know, the horse race and the personalities and all that sort of stuff. And so part of the reason that I have stuck around though is I like Washington, like, it's not a terrible place. I think there's really brilliant people. I think more people come to Washington because they care about things than come to Washington because they want to be rich and famous. If you want to be rich, probably go to New York. If you want to be famous, you can probably go to Hollywood. Oh, so you, quick thing. So you just you would dispute the Hollywood frog, the DC is Hollywood frog with people. Not entirely. Sure. There's some of that. Of course, it's a company town and a lot of people come in and they want to, you know, make it big in that one in that one organization, that one, you know, industry rather. But a lot of people are coming here because it's a place to come do good. I mean, you know, you got thousands of people working on the Hill. They're not all just here because someday they want to be on TV or because they want to, like, you know, run an organization. Some of them just care about stuff. And so I am somewhat optimistic because that continues to be the case despite how awful a place it can appear to be sometimes. Yeah, I mean, it's easy to be pessimistic to like the state of American politics is bad. It can be scary. And there's not a lot of, I don't see an easy way for things to cool down. But, you know, we've been through a lot as a country. And I think there's a lot of really smart people much smarter than me that are in Washington trying to make it work. And I hope that some of them figure it out. Actually, that's the perfect pivot to Diane Feinstein's office. And just like the Hill because you mentioned Hill staffers. So can you just so a just like as quick as you can, because once again, don't want to give away too much of the book here. Just like, how does Diane Feinstein's office like fit into this story? And I'd love for you just to actually explain to folks where congressional staff fit into this entire picture. Like once again, like, not paid well. It's a shocking, it's actually a shocking number. But I think you said the actual number of like, like Hill staffers in the book. I was like, man, like, that actually tracks mathematics. We just like thinking like, wow, that's a lot of people. So yeah, just explain

the Hill staffers side of this. Well, so the story that that you're referring to from the book about Feinstein involves a young man named Jermakus Perley, and he young black staffer who worked in Feinstein's office for five years, brilliant guy from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, went to Harvard, Stanford, Oxford, you know, just a really, really smart guy who went to work for her and had one of these kind of low paying, underappreciated jobs, actually got promoted to a slightly less low paying, slightly less underappreciated job. But during COVID, he sort of had like a little bit of a break. You know, he lost his father to COVID. He had been trying to kind of sound the alarm in the office about dying Feinstein's mental state, which we've all kind of come to see as a country has been in decline and is sad. But he was early trying to get people to pay attention. But he also, you know, was having trouble at work. He stopped showing up. He started writing letters to constituents without having them first approved by the by the by the office. Fireball offenses ends up getting fired. He, I came, he came to my attention because he made a protest video where he took a bunch of psilocybin mushrooms broke into her office, smoked a joint at her desk and kind of danced around, hoping that afterwards he could do interviews and draw attention to the kind of state of, you know, what it was like to be a staffer, underappreciated staffer, what was actually happening in the office. And that to me was like kind of a wild story and, you know, worthy of looking into. But what really made it worth telling to me was I felt like his telling was sort of the, I don't know, kind of most outrageous, but still still made sense, kind of telling of what it was like to be on the hill. And so I talked to him and a lot of people around him and kind of this whole ecosystem of media and and staffers that that could relate to what his experience was like. And so I wanted to be able to to bring to light in this book a lot of stories about people who don't generally get their stories told in books about Washington. Yeah, it's interesting just because so not only do you have the Diane Feinstein, you know, gerontocracy moment, but you also have that story intersecting with broader conversations about unionization on the hill and racism and other like different incidents. Where do you, I don't want to ask like where you come down on like the unionization question, but where do you come down on how we should conceive of staffers on the hill? Because the awkward dynamic is these are obviously white collar professionals, but they're also the help. Like in some cases, like literally the help like, you know, getting in the groceries, like doing dry cleaning, those different dynamics, they're dramatically underpaid. But how should we just consider, I feel like that's part of the bigger debate that's kind of happening right now, because obviously, and this is where things get hypocritical, like very quickly at a leadership level. Where do you think about this? You know, I think the big issue here is you want people to come to Washington to do this hard work, to write legislation, to help out with, you know, members of Congress, to do these difficult jobs. And it's really hard to get people to do that if you underpay them, expect them to have their own car, to make them drive around members to, you know, like you said, do the laundry or walk the dogs. It's really hard to get people to do that, except for people who, you know, maybe are privileged enough to be able to do that and not have it be a problem. If you only get paid \$40,000 a year, but you have a trust fund, say it's okay to go work in a member of Congress's office for a while

and have to have your own car. But that means that Congress is going to be represented by, you know, only a certain type of people. And so the unionization thing, I think it's very interesting because it's a way to try to make the jobs better, to make it a more appealing place to be. And if Capitol Hill reflects the country better, then I think Capitol Hill will reflect the country better. And the last and most meta question is, where does media fit into all of this? You had a bunch of new media organizations launched, but I think we're also, and you could take this final question wherever you want to take up, my last bit of commentary is, you know, I had Ben Smith of *Stem of Foreign* for the New York Times on last month and we're having a conversation about his book about like the social media digital news era where everything is about clicks and attention. And the biggest thing I just kind of picked up just in terms of surveying and living in D.C. over the past few years is that there's a real gap between the incentives that drive clicks, engagement, attention, and what tends to matter as much when you're actually looking at things. In terms of like, who's deciding what, who actually matters? Like most people haven't heard of Leah Hunt Hendricks. She doesn't have like a big podcast or a YouTube channel, but she's a dramatically important persona, whether or not she wins her ideological fights. So just like, where does like attention and notoriety and just, what does that fit into here? Yeah, I mean, I think it's sort of one of the central questions of how, or central answers maybe to how we got to where we are, right? Like, it is a media, it is an attention, attention is the thing that matters the most. And, you know, that's how Donald Trump got to win a primary originally is he was just sucking up all the oxygen out of the room and was so entertaining. And everybody, all the cameras kind of trained on to him and it helped his, it helps his election. And I think a lot of people learn that lesson in Congress and, you know, outside groups, I think a lot of people realize that if you can get everyone to focus on you, then you can raise the money you need or, you know, get the access you need to become influential. And I think what I wanted to do with this book is find people who were not just people desperate to be written about, desperate to be in the news, someone like Leah Hunt Hendricks was sort of like harder to get and find than somebody like Sean McAuley. And you, and by the way, you get into a dating life. So you, you, you succeed, you go above the bounds of just sort of getting that one quick book about human beings and no human being moment is too trivial to at least, you know, ask about, right? But I have to interrupt you just because to be, be clear, that made me sound like I was like critiquing you of like going into salacious details. In terms of the story, in a weird way, it does, it genuinely does track in terms of the story you're telling. So yeah, sorry, go on. No, no, no. So I just think that, that I don't know, it's a chicken or egg situation, like which came first, did the, did the media only start seeking out clicks? And then everybody realized that they should do clickable things or people doing clickable things. And then the media decided that this is like where they wanted to put their attention. I don't know which came first, but it definitely becomes like a feeding frenzy. And you can, you know, see it with the newest members of Congress who are, you know, having the biggest social media followings and say the most outrageous things. And, you know, there's a lot of talk about saying the quiet part out loud these days. You know, saying the quiet part out loud can make you very successful in Washington. And a lot of that has to do with, you know, the media. Okay, I lied. The actual last question is what advice would you have for any younger person?

Based on these stories, based on your reporting, your writing, for anyone jumping into this particular disruptive moment, because especially because we're leading into the 2024 election, hearing, reading these stories, hearing people tell them to you, like, what are just your lessons? Not policy, just sort of like, hey, why should you be a staffer who decides to blow up your Twitter account? Like when you're 23, why in that category? I think the most important thing that people can do is try to be true to themselves. And that's very hard to do in Washington. And I know that sounds cliched and kind of corny. But, you know, in this book, there's a lot of times where people were confronted with something that made them uncomfortable. And they did it anyway,

because the gambling story perfectly comes to mind. Exactly. They felt like, you know, well, the bosses is okay. And everyone else is doing it. And everyone else thinks it's okay. So it must be okay. And then by the end of the year, they're like, well, what the hell was I doing that for? And I think that happens all the time in Washington, you know, people are always going to be confronted with people ahead of them or on top, you know, above them in the pecking order, you know, asking things of them. And if it makes them feel uncomfortable, they should push back against it because, you know, ultimately, you know, you only have your own kind of guiding principles to keep you who you are. And that advice gives the sounds obvious and trite, but is actually deeply important in context award of all time. So Ben, this has been super fun. The book is the big break. The gamblers, party animals and troublemakers trying to win in Washington

while America loses its mind. I cannot recommend enough for people who are trying to understand how we can really interpret our capital during this political moment. Thank you for joining me on the realignment. Thanks so much for having me. It was a blast.

Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like the sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year, or \$500 for a lifetime membership. Thanks. See you all next time.