

[Transcript] The Realignment / 378 | Joshua Zeitz: What President Lincoln's Faith Means for a Secularizing America

Marshall here. Welcome back to the Re-alignment.

Hey, everyone. Before we dive into this episode, I want to reiterate how Friday episodes work at the Re-alignment. We put out two different types of Friday episodes. One, Supercast subscribers get full access to Sogret and my Ask Me Anything discussion episodes. You can submit your own questions and comments on the show's Supercast page.

If you'd like to subscribe, go to Re-alignment.Supercast.com. You can also find a teaser of the previous AMA

episode on last Friday's slot on your podcast player. Two, the other type of episode I'm putting out, which is demonstrated by the episode today, is focused on history. These are available to everyone regardless whether you're not a Supercast subscriber. I got a comment on the Supercast Q&A

page where folks asked for more history-related content. And frankly, as the show has moved more and more books, we've gotten more and more input from publishers with really interesting books of history that while they don't quite fit the Re-alignment's day-to-day American politics theme, they're just interesting. So today's episode fits that dynamic. I'm speaking with author slash historian Joshua Zeitz about his new book, *Lincoln's God, How Faith Transformed a President and a Nation*. We also discussed his previous book, *Building the Great Society*, inside Lyndon Johnson's White House. I was interested in this book on a couple levels.

One, any discussion of faith and politics is fascinating to me as a millennial who came of age during the George W. Bush era in the 2000s, where faith and religion were at the center of electoral politics and big issues like the stem cell research debate, questions of where candidates and presidents went to church, what their faith looked like were just so key, and it really feels like that is just no longer a part of our political dynamic. I can say that no one's shocked that President Trump is not an active church grower, but I'm not quite sure what Rhonda Santis' religious faith looks like. There's just a reality of post-2016 politics kind of removing that from the table of obvious issues. Two, the period that a lot of this book covers, the second great awakening before the Civil War is just fascinating, and I definitely don't know as much about it as I could, so I think this is a good thing to dial in on to get a little more background on. Hope you all enjoyed this episode and a huge thank you to the Supercast

subscribers whose support made these bonus episodes possible.

Joshua Zeitz, welcome to the realignment. Thank you, it's great to be here.

Yeah, I'm excited to speak with you because I can ask you a question I've wanted to ask at least 10 different authors, writers, historians, TV hosts, etc. over the past two years.

Why is everyone and their cousin writing a book about Abraham Lincoln

over the past two years specifically? Joe Scarborough's got one, Steve Inskip has one coming in, you have one, Noah Feldman did one last year, what is this specific Lincoln moment?

I kind of know that it's a moment. I mean, there has been so much written about Lincoln, and in some ways, I mean, for me, it's probably two things. I mean,

they're a little contradictory. On one hand, he acts as an avatar for America in the 19th century, or 19th century America. He seems to be representative of everything about that moment for the country,

and yet on the other hand, he's an icon class who always marched one or two beats off from

the rest of the country as well. And I don't know about what's informing this moment, it probably has something superficially to do about with the current state of politics and polarization and comparisons made to the 1850s. I've made some of them as well in my writing, although I think it can get a little facile. But this notion that he was this great unifying figure, which of course he was not, he was probably one of the most divisive and polarizing figures in American politics in his day. But people remember him differently. I imagine it has something to do with that. But he has been an object of people's fascination long before last year, for sure. Yeah, of course. And when we're talking about Lincoln moments, the one that I was most cognizant of in terms of first getting into politics back in high school was the team of rivals moment where of course, Kern's Goodwin comes out. We're very much in that pre financial crisis, but also post Obama 2004 DNC speech where he's talking about not a red America, not a blue America. And then the idea is you bring a cabinet together, always different people. Can you just start by commenting on where, because I think that's probably the last time a lot of folks like connected with Lincoln at like a metaphorical narrative level. Just talk to us about the like unifier team of rivals version of Lincoln. So in many ways, it was actually I wrote a book on John Hay and John Nicolai who were his two, who were his two principal White House aides and they later became basically as official biographers, they did a 10 volume biography of Lincoln between 1880 and 1890. They had exclusive access to his papers until the 1940s long after they were dead. They kind of originated this team of rivals notion of this masterful politician, who was almost a magician and his ability to navigate uncertain political waters. I don't know that they, however, played so much into the unifying Lincoln as great national unifier theme that seems to me to be more of a post stars Kern's Goodwin moment. And I think you're absolutely right that that that that that time in the two mid 2000s to early 2010s is when this idea of Lincoln as the great consensus builder emerges. You could see it. I mean, President Obama began launched his presidential race in 2007 at the old Illinois State House, which is where Lincoln gave his, you know, nation country divided speech. And then I don't know if you remember Steven Spielberg's. Right, but they did the one of the trailers, they put it on during one of the presidential debates in 2012. The trailer premiered that night. And it was called Unifier or something like that. And it was about, you know, his great moments of unification, which is fascinating, because, you know, people tend to remember Martin Luther King this way as well. But both of these guys were extraordinarily polarizing. And in many corners of the country, deeply unpopular on the eve of their death, it was, you look at the 1864 presidential race. It was one of the nastiest, filthiest presidential races to date at that point, and probably since the racial vitriol, or the racist vitriol the Democrats threw at him that year was unprecedented. He told John Hay, it's a little singular that I, who am not a vindictive man, should always have been before the people for election in canvases marked for their bitterness, always but once. When I came to Congress, it was a quiet time, but always besides that, the contest in which I've been prominent and been marked with great ranker. We don't remember that because he was shot and killed on Good Friday. But he was an extraordinarily controversial figure in his time. So the angle that you're approaching when it comes to analyzing Lincoln is the angle of faith. So a couple of different things that could be important to hit from the start. Number one, what would you say is like the conventional wisdom if there is any about what Lincoln's

faith actually was in the first place? I think there are two. I think that speaks to polarization, right? Somehow our politics polarized history as well. I think there's a strong faction that believes he was completely an atheist his entire life and never really had any particular religious conviction. And I think that that's probably a minority, but it's well represented. And I guess the majority of the opinion was that he was essentially an evangelical Christian, at least later in life. And neither of those is true whatsoever. But there was a real desire in the moments, the days after his death to paint him as a Christian martyr, and I mean to have been assassinated after leading a liberation war and then being assassinated on Good Friday. It's understandable that a country that is predominantly religious and predominantly evangelical would seek to make Abraham Lincoln into a Christ-like religious martyr. And so that is what essentially happened for decades after his death.

And where do you, and this is without asking you to give two details, sorry, because that's the book, just give me in 10 seconds or less, like what was Lincoln then, obviously?

He was a decidedly a non-believer throughout most of his childhood and adulthood. He became a believer and probably a Christian. His wife later said he was not a technical Christian, but I think by that she somehow became a Christian during his time in the White House. It probably happened roughly around the time that his son Willie died in 1862. And as he began grappling

to understand grasping, to understand what his role in overseeing this carnival of death and violence really was and what it was all about. But he never becomes, what's interesting is he becomes very deft at appealing to the sensibilities of evangelical audiences, which were the majority of Americans in the voting public in the North, becomes really good at weaving religious and Christian themes and language into his speeches and public statements. And he becomes very, very skilled at courting the religious vote. But he never becomes an evangelical Christian in the way most of his country people were. He's not a Trinitarian. He's probably closer to being a Unitarian if he's anything, but he's probably not that either. What's a Trinitarian?

Yeah, a Unitarian. There's the believing in Christ, the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost.

There's a belief in Christ as God rather than God. So he's closer to being a Unitarian.

I think when you're talking about the 19th century, part of the reason why people are running out of the 19th century right now is that there are parts that are going to rhyme with our history and experiences today, obviously the polarization, the deeply engaged political moment we're in. I'm very actually like constitutionally opposed to a lot of like, I think frankly, the lazy, are we in a new Civil War writing that's kind of going on right now? But once again, that writing is filling a desire and need and interest that people have. So I think that part will resonate. I think the part that isn't going to resonate as much is just like the rising and role of faith in like that 1860s, 1850s, 1840s environment, especially as the country secularizes today. So for the audience, can you help us understand the role of religion, especially evangelical Protestant religion in the America of the mid 19th century?

So America from the early 1800s or late 1790s really through the 1940s is experiencing this massive revival of religiosity, particularly Protestantism and evangelical Protestantism.

Historians call it the second great awakening. You're seeing the emergence and growth of new churches or churches that hadn't been particularly influential in the 18th century, the Methodists, the Baptists, Presbyterians, new churches like the disciples of Christ. They cast off the old

Calvinist belief in predestination and embrace a more Armenian belief in people's free will and ability to secure their own salvation by accepting Christ in their lives and becoming Christians. There's a strong sense of providential mission in this, that America is going to be God's new Canaan. There's a perfectionist element to it. And this is the predominant strain of Christianity and religion in this period. It's not to disregard the growing number of Catholics or Jews in the country or non-conforming Christian denominations. But this is where kind of the locus is. And they did involve themselves in the Antebellum period in a wide array of social reform movements, everything from advocating for public education and temperance to Sabbath observance, no mail carrying on Sabbath, for instance, and for a minority of evangelicals, abolitionism as well. But that having been said, the religion in this period was very much focused on filling pews and winning souls. So even abolitionists believed that their role was to convince the slaveholder that holding human beings in bondage was sin, bring them to Christ and get them to manumit their slaves. Abolitionists, most of whom were primarily

driven by sincere Christian conviction, did not participate for the most part until the 1850s in partisan politics. They believed that that was simply not their role. The war changes things considerably, and the churches and church members and church leaders get much more comfortable about bringing their religion into political life and into public life. And Lincoln encourages it for easy to understand reasons, but it does transform in the same way that religion helped Americans accommodate or understand the civil war, the civil war, and the politics around it also changed the way that the churches thought about what it meant to be a good Christian. And part of that was participating in politics more.

Yeah, and something I'm curious about. The way you're articulating this, I think, is going to be useful for folks, because it's kind of turning on the head of least a part of the conventional history you probably learned during like AP US history or something where it's like in the 70s, Jimmy Carter activates evangelical Christians, they then go to the right during the age of Reagan, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But your point is that we could understand much of the key political conflicts and just general countries dynamics in the 1850s and 1860s through an evangelical religious lens. I'm curious, how did that engagement in politics from a religious perspective kind of play out across other issues other than slavery? So for example, if I tell you, if you tell me you're an evangelical Christian in 2002, I'd say, okay, so stem cells, gay marriage, et cetera, et cetera. How did that play out in the 1860s?

Yeah. And remember, of course, I think for listeners, it's important to remember that we probably use the terms differently today. I mean, Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Baptists, most of them would have considered themselves evangelicals in the 19th century. Today, the word has been somewhat appropriated to mean conservative Christians, conservative evangelicals. There are plenty of liberal Baptists, liberal Methodists, liberal Presbyterians, whether they would call themselves evangelical today or not is an open question. But the terminology probably is not perfectly transferable. But I think in the 1860s, this was largely about slavery. But as the churches during the war got more comfortable being bringing Christianity into the Republican political sphere, by 1864, for instance, the churches were, they were incredibly aligned with the Republican Party in 1864, the individual synods and synods and Methodist conferences and Baptist regional Baptist organizations openly

endorsed the Republican ticket. The Methodist Bishop Matthew Simpson, who was probably the leading figure in the Methodist church during the war, gave speeches where he wholeheartedly told his flock to vote for Abraham Lincoln and the rail splitter president. I mean, the prominent clergymen were out on the stump that Republican Party, speaking at Republican Party rallies. I mean, there was just it was out the church organs were or newspapers were endorsing the Republican ticket. So something had clearly happened. And I guess to your question, I would say, let's look at what happened in the three or four decades after that left a meaningful impact. And you saw Christian leaders and activists much more comfortable bringing their religion into the public sphere after the Civil War than before it. And that could that could express itself in different ways. It could be what you might think of as conservative today. If you look at figures like Anthony Comstock or who's back in the news these days or Francis Willard, you know, they were anti vice crusaders who brought their deep religiosity to the war.

Sorry, why is why is Anthony Comstock back in the news?

Well, the Comstock laws that he helped get pushed through Congress.

Oh, is that Comstock? Okay.

Is that Comstock, right? Yes. It's why a bunch of conservative religious justices on whichever circuit court yesterday were invoking the Comstock law to ask why you couldn't ban the use of an abortifacient and through the mail. But, you know, it could be coercive in that way and in the kind of anti vice, anti pornography, anti, anti everything involving sex type. But the belief that a Christian could bring those convictions into public sphere and ask for laws that would govern accordingly. Or at the same time, there were liberal Christians like Washington Gladden who were involved with the social gospel movement and who were deeply involved in progressive politics and trying to force through laws governing worker safety and children's health and safety and, you know, eight hour days for workers and protections for women. So I think what happened in the decades after the Civil War was that organized Christian organized Christianity felt much more comfortable being involved in politics and asserting a role for Christians and religion and politics, even as the evangelical movement kind of splintered into a liberal and a more conservative wing. This kind of brings to mind another difference between that early 2000s period and today just seems that when we're looking at the presidency and presidents, their individual faith, their individual journeys just are just off the table, unimportant as a topic of conversation. I'm not going to get into, you know, exactly how much President Obama was going to church, but I do remember that in 2008, it was like a point of controversy that was, but it's not even talked about. We talk about Joe Biden being Catholic, but it's much more in that like Uncle Joe is Irish and gregarious sense of Catholic than like whatever his actual specific faith practices. So can we talk about how, just as a historian, taking a step back, how have you kind of seen the way we discussed faith and presidency has changed over just like the past decade or so? Well, the past decade, I think, you know, we've seen church membership decline in this country, the number of active churchgoers has declined, the number of people who identify as religious has declined, and this has been on the decline for, you know, 30, 40 plus years. I mean, we kind of hit

a high watermark, at least in the modern era in the 1950s, but is that's declined? And as we've also become way more pluralistic than we were say even 40 years ago, church attendance or religiosity as a barometer of somebody's fitness to serve as president is just, it's not considered

the same as it would have been 20 or 30 years ago. It was at one point. But I would argue that it was more of a post-war phenomenon. I mean, Franklin Roosevelt was hardly a churchgoer. He wasn't much of a churchgoer. I think that the Cold War era saw us become a country that, and there have been some good books written on this, but people like Kevin Cruz at Princeton University about how like the fusion of religion and civic life in the Cold War era was something almost singular. And so, you know, if you're fighting godless communism, you probably need to be something closer to God. And, you know, maybe we hit our high watermark with Ronald Reagan on this, although

ironically, he was not that much of a churchgoer himself either. But as he famously said at the religious round table, I know you can't endorse me, but I endorse you. And that was a, you know, he was telescoping to them that they were his constituency. But I think it was a post-Cold War, I think it was a post-World War II Cold War phenomenon, and we seem to have slipped out of it. And the demographic reality is just not supported anymore. And this is where I think it's important to note that I am not Christian, so I'm not trying to push anything on anyone here when I ask this question. But if we're thinking of the 1850s and 1860s, these huge challenges, you're making clear of it with religion, faith, et cetera, at a personal and a society level, you had almost a toolkit or a framework for handling these different challenges, thinking through the war, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Do you think it's possible that today, a large part of our rancor and seeming inability to handle problems, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, is going to be due to like that religious void that's opened up?

No. I mean, we were a tremendously religious country in the 1840s and 1850s, but that didn't stop the major Christian denominations from going to war with each other in the 1840s. And you saw the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterians literally have three national divorces where the churches split along regional lines. And we're seeing that today as well, right, even within the same churches. It's less regional today than it is theological and social, but it's cutting across some geographic lines. And the deep religiosity of the American people in the 1850s didn't stop them from going to civil war with each other. So I think I've heard that argument, but I think that it doesn't work historically anyway. Maybe it does sociologically, that would be a question for someone else. But if it happens in 1860, in what was arguably the most religious and most evangelical and most homogeneously religious country in the world at that time, there's no reason to believe that religion is somehow the safeguard against a national civil war, so to speak. Something I'd love to hear you explain a little more is just this second great awakening moment slash idea, because obviously this gets a little complicated when it comes to looking at America at a sociocultural level. But you could argue that there's something, and you're the historian, so correct me if I'm just overly popularizing this notion, but you could argue that in many ways that the 1960s, the civil rights era, the George Floyd moment, there's something in America's fiber, there's something within the character of the country where we have these moments of evangelism, a variety of ideas. So can you just talk about like the second great awakening and maybe, and whether you think that there's something too bad idea of these being recurrent features of American political and social life?

I think there probably is, although I would argue against trying to come up with some definitive pattern. I can tell you that like when you're seeing moments of profound demographic, economic, political or cultural change, it tends to create something big. So we know that the second great

awakening is occurring alongside two other really important developments. One is the development of a market economy. So the world Abraham Lincoln's father grew up in was sort of proto-market or pre-market. No roads, there were, I'm exaggerating, but you don't have roads, you don't have bridges,

you don't have canals, you don't have railroads. We don't have those things, there's no way to bring any goods to market. So if you can't bring goods to market, you're just going to be a subsistence

farmer and live in a barter economy in an extended kinship type neighborhood because there's no opportunity to do anything else than that, which explains why Lincoln and his father had such divergent worldviews and didn't quite see eye to eye because Lincoln's coming of age as all of these things are happening. And the emergence of this new market economy is occurring alongside the democratization of American politics. You're moving from the politics of the early republic, which were extremely elite led and deferential toward Jacksonian America, which is noisy and boisterous and competitive in the same way that the second great awakening is creating a noisy boisterous and competitive environment among and within churches for congregates. And you can shop

for your own theology and shop for your own church and shop for your own denomination. In the same

way, you can shop for your own candidate and also kind of choose your own adventure and life economically. And it's hard to say why these three things are happening together, but they certainly are. We know that the second great awakening was the most vibrant in places that had experienced a market revolution, some places like the burned over district of western New York, so called because it burned over with religious revivalism in the 1820s and 30s, but it was also the place where the Erie Canal suddenly connected all these western farmers to markets in the east and on the eastern seaboard. These are the places where religious enthusiasm was the strongest and where political competition and participation was the strongest. And so we know these things are all happening at the same time. They're reinforcing each other. European visitors to the US are looking at this and they're like, huh, these things seem to be happening at the same time. I'm not sure why, but they all seem to be happening together in the same place. They can see it, they know it. Something is happening right now, I think, right? And we were a country undergoing tremendous demographic change, economic change in terms of the structural changes to the economy. There's clearly something happening and I think sociologists and historians later will try to figure out what that was, but I do think you see these moments to your point where you get these very popular movements and they probably don't all, they're not all apples to apples, but they all stem from change. You can look at the post-war civil rights movement and tie it to opportunity that owed to World War II and the post-war economic prosperity or to the Cold War, in which we had to compete with the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of people in decolonized areas of Africa and Asia. All these things are happening at the same time and they create a moment. I think we get these moments. They may not be perfectly secular, but they can be tied to like fundamental undercurrents of structural change. But the trick is how do you figure out which ones are operative and when and that's the hard part? You said something at the start of the episode, which I'm going to just steal because I think it's fascinating. This idea that part of what fascinates us about Lincoln is the fact that he's

both emblematic of the 19th century, but he's also an iconoclast like two or three steps outside of things. Can you just explain the ideas at the center of those two points?

Sure. I mean, we think of him as representative. I mean, he is in many ways what you want to think of as America in the 19th century, the self-made man, the honest man who was self-taught in auto-dictat, very little formal schooling, raised himself up by his bootstraps and became a great president. That's the story we want to tell about the 19th century for sure. It's a little distorted, but be that as it may. But he's just a very odd and quirky figure. He's irreligious in a world full of evangelical Christians. He's anti-slavery well before it's fashionable to be anti-slavery. He, even in his personal life, was just a little quirky and odd. There was always something about him that was slightly offbeat and certainly in religion, that was the case too. Even when he does develop some faith during his presidency, he's not moving in the direction of most Americans toward a personal relationship with a knowable God through Christ or anything like that. He's really more of a kind of deist in some ways who, as all the church leaders, he's encouraging, become convinced that they know for sure that God's on the union side and union is on God's side. He's not sure at all. He says that in the second inaugural address. He also says it explicitly in this memo that he writes to himself. So even in his religiosity, he's different from the rest of the country. But we like to view him as representative. Did you explain what deism is real quick? The belief in there's a God, there's something divine, but it doesn't line up perfectly with certainly with Christian doctrine. It doesn't line up with the belief that Christ is God. There's this belief in a more, I mean, Jefferson and I guess Benjamin Franklin were probably more deists than not. It's the belief in some sort of organizing force, but it's not necessarily God in the way that most Christians and most Jews would think of God. So my weird question. Could you explain what 19th century atheism looked like in the sense that atheism, for me, post Darwin, post 20th century, that just makes a lot of intuitive sense. There are scientific answers for this, this, this, this and that. But if you're sitting in the 1840s, everything from like germ theory to how the cosmos works are just not quite as clear as they inherently would be. So what would make you look out at the world in the 1830s? And your point at the start of the episode

was there's like a certain small percentage of people who were resoundingly believing he was a strong atheist. But just what was atheism in this pre scientific, pre atomic era?

It's hard to know what it was across the board for Lincoln. He did believe, he called it the doctrine of necessity, did believe in the antebellum period before the war that there was some sort of force that I think he viewed as more scientific in the 19th century sense of the word that governed and regulated the world. But, you know, he believed that when you died, you died, that was it. There was no belief in some sort of intelligent being. But again, this is what makes him so unique, because this is just not a belief that most people held in this period. It would have been really out of step. So most people, I think, like him who were were, you know, the was I can't remember how Thomas Paine put in, he was a little earlier, obviously, but he viewed a kind of an architecture somewhere up there in the sky, right, who was influencing events. But I guess that would have been about as close as Lincoln was to it. But it wasn't rooted deeply in science, I think for him, he just could not he just could not get himself to the place where he believed what other people believed. Yeah, that's a useful bit of nuance. Okay, so in

this last two sections, quick question on the autodidactical nature of, you know, Lincoln's education, it seems to me that if you do any basic reading of history, autodidacts are very inspirational, but they also have very critical weaknesses. They tend to get sort of obsessed with like their own individual theories, like Hitler, not by I'm not comparing Lincoln to Hitler, but Hitler is like a famous autodidact who develops all they become cranks. Were there any weaknesses to Lincoln's like self taught education that kind of manifests themselves and how he lived his life? I'm going to say I doubt it, because education in the 19th century was so different from what it is today. I mean, it it most almost every college in the United States at that point was church affiliated and a college education was Bible study, Greek, Latin, and some mathematics, but it wasn't a liberal arts education or a scientific university education of the sort that came into the United States via the German universities in the late 19th century. It didn't it made you more polished, but I don't know that it made you a more refined thinker. And while he didn't read widely, and this is what he said to his law partner, he read deeply, so when he became a surveyor, he immersed himself in Euclidean mathematics and he became a pretty sharp mathematician and and understood the philosophy behind math. As he became president, he out of frustration with his own generals, many of whom initially refused to fight a total war, and we're kind of fighting by the old West Point Code. You know, he immersed himself in military tactic, tactics books and military strategy books. If you ask me that today, like I would argue that missing a university education today probably does put you at some disadvantage. But I'm not sure that he necessarily missed a ton, he certainly regretted that he didn't have more of a formal education. But other than Polish, it would be hard to say that there was anything he necessarily would have absorbed at a university college, there were no universities that he couldn't have done or didn't do by studying the law himself by studying Euclidean, you know, theorems and mathematics himself by studying military strategy himself. Maybe he would have been forced to be a wider reader. Hard to say what that would have done for him, it would have made him as clever as John Hay was as a writer, but Lincoln was a plenty good writer. I'm glad you described his reading in study as deep, but not wide, because just speaking as a person who interviews a lot of authors and a lot of people in Silicon Valley, you have a lot of autodidact types who are very, very widely read, but that tends to contribute to like the creation of these like grand theories that take like this surface thing and that surface thing, and that's once again kind of the autodidact trap. So that's very interesting the way you described it. Okay, so for these last few questions, I just want to zoom out and just ask about just broader writing that you've done, because I think you've got a great selection of books that folks should take a look at. And by the way, I'm in Austin, Texas, and there's a copy of Building the Great Society on sale I've been looking at for a few months. So this is my personal note to actually pick that up for accountability purposes. But let's just talk about that for a second. Let me put it this way. I think the reason why LBJ is interesting in this moment today is that in many ways, he's resonant with Joe Biden, in the sense that it's not astoundingly obvious that he would be a president who would be the one most capable of enacting change. It's not clear that his ideology would be quite in sync with like progressive thought, but in both cases, they were easily the two most progressive, well, Joe Biden is more progressive than Obama,

and LBJ is the most progressive post-war president. How should we understand those examples together? I'm reciting all this conventional wisdom at you, so poke holes in it, but like, that's how I understand the moment in that way. You know, I think the way I think about this is that LBJ governed in a particular moment when liberals and most liberals believed that in the post-war era, we had cracked the code on economic growth and prosperity. Whereas in the 1930s, liberal economists and political scientists believed that capitalism was fundamentally broken and dead,

that the only way you could resolve societal inequalities and poverty was to redistribute wealth because the pie just wasn't going to grow. America then becomes the arsenal for the world and for democracy during World War II. It wins the war, defeats fascism in Europe and Asia, builds this tremendous post-war economy, builds these incredible suburbs, and it's sending rockets into the sky, and the economy is growing at a clip of five or six percent a year, and so liberals believe, well, you know, in fact, we figured out how to grow the economy in perpetuity with low inflation, so that the point is that you've got to provide a safety net for people who can't help themselves and then move through programs like Medicaid or what is now called SNAP or Head Start, and then you have to not Head Start, I would argue that that falls into the second bucket, and the second bucket is that you need to provide opportunities for the people who've

been left behind to seize their share of national wealth and prosperity, so that's education, it's job training, health programs for people who can't get a job and be productive if you have no access to health care. So it's what you call qualitative liberalism rather than quantitative liberalism, and it seems like the right way to go at the time, but then if you fast forward to today, we no longer have that faith in an economy that's growing in perpetuity, where all you got to do is hand the people who are able, body the tools they need to capture their share of wealth, and so you've seen a liberal agenda from Obama through now evolve into something that's probably more redistributive and that's aimed at ensuring outcomes rather than just opportunity. The irony though is that we haven't been really able to do that in a sharply divided country, and so the architecture that LBJ put into place, the programs they put into place, were never met to serve as many people as they do, they were never meant to do more than plug the dam, so today Medicaid, Medicare, and Obamacare insured the vast majority of Americans, Medicaid was never supposed to insure that many people, and I'm not arguing it shouldn't, I'm a supporter of it, but that wasn't the intent of the program, food security programs were never intended to serve as many people as they do today, and I'm not arguing that they shouldn't, I'm arguing that the economy has become way more unequal, growth has slowed, more people have been left behind, and so the notion of qualitative liberalism today may be inadequate to the task, and I think liberals are grasping at how to explain that, but the only option they really have right now is to let these programs that were always designed for a different economy just expand organically, so we're stuck in this argument. I like the way you articulated it, because didn't LBJ give, he gave some speech where he was imagining the plenty of 2000 essentially, and basically what you're articulating is, you look at RFK's Visit to Mississippi in 1967, and LBJ during the initial period of the Great Society, and they were looking at people who are living in shacks, and there's 10 people sharing one or two rooms, so we should understand the Great Society programs

as part of what was supposed to be a catch-up transition. What then did, I guess once everyone caught up, what was the vision, what was 2000 in that case?

How did it ultimately play out?

Yes, sorry, what was the end, so if Medicaid is a transition to helping people catch up, etc, etc, etc, what was the end state of society? I think the vision was a world in which the economy would continue to grow, LBJ's programs like K-12 education, which was all him, federal aid to higher education, job retraining, programs like the Job Corps, programs like Head Start, which were meant to provide kids from disadvantaged communities with a head start, but not just educationally, but in terms of food security and healthcare, Medicaid, which was supposed to plug the gap for single mothers, widows, the disabled. The vision was that some people who couldn't help themselves would be captured by the social safety net, and everyone else would magically be able to do very well and enjoy their fair share of the always-expanding American economy, and it didn't foresee a whole lot. It didn't foresee the inflationary era of the late 60s and 70s, which wiped out a lot of salary growth and wealth. It didn't foresee deindustrialization. This was an economy that was based on good unionized blue collar jobs. It didn't foresee the destruction of the unionized sector, particularly within the private sector, which led to, again, like state didn't see stagnated wages that basically froze solid when adjusted for inflation after 1973. It didn't see the rise in single-parent families, and nothing wrong with a single-parent family, but in an economy post-1973 where wages are stagnant when adjusted for inflation, you need two earners, not one in order to stay above water. They didn't see the great risk shift, the decline with unions of private health care plans and defined benefits pensions, and they didn't see all that risk shift over to individualized workers who were now, if they had a retirement plan, it was tied to the market, or they had to go out and buy private health insurance if they could. They didn't foresee any of this, nor could they have, and that world is just fundamentally different from the world in 1965 when most middle, when you had a rising middle class that was benefiting from unionization and all the benefits associated with being a unionized worker, when you had low inflation, high or low unemployment, it's just a different world. Conservatives, they blame the great society for all of the world's ills, but they don't look at all at the ways in which the private sector sort of abrogated the social contract that it reached in the 1950s and 60s. That social contract was conducive to a particular form of liberalism once that social contract was violated or that they couldn't deliver on it, maybe. Well, that great society regime is no longer necessarily adequate to the economy we have now, but at least that's what I tried to work on in the book. Yeah, no, it's a great pitch. I would say the last big question, other book you wrote about is Flappers. You're writing about the, I don't know if that's the actual title, but that's the 1920s. I'm curious. Initially, as we were quote, unquote, like opening up the economy, coming out of the pandemic at an official level, there's a lot of like, it's the new roaring 20s, like we're coming out this era perfectly rhymes with the end of the Spanish flu. To what degree do you think the 2020s are a strong historical analogy to the 1920s and what's different between these two periods?

I would have said they were a good analogy before the pandemic. I don't know what to make of this country. The pandemic seems to have lost, led the country to lose its mind. I don't know. Wait, the quick thing, that's so like not after the Spanish flu analog before. So like,

take us to pretend we're doing this in 2019. What are you, if I ask you this question, what would you say? We're on the cusp of a country that seems like to have this a lot of prosperity, although a lot of it's on paper and is probably all sugar high, right? Like stock markets going through the roof, you know, private company valuations going through the roof, all these people becoming millionaires and billionaires. When we all know a lot of it is just like literally, it's on paper. It could go, it could and did go away really quickly. There's this sort of like, a more libertine culture, a liberalization of everything from and everything's relative, obviously, right? Like 19. Women voting is not quite the same thing as like, you know, whatever we're doing today. But you know, we're a country that's like rethinking its position on everything from LGBT rights to immigration. Like it's just like, we're going through an exciting moment of cultural and social regeneration. There's a lot of like sugar high wealth that's creating a lot of like excitement. And there's this period of like, but at the same time, it's underlaid by this fundamental economic inequality that's laying below the surface, which was always the case in the 1920s. It was always the case today. We didn't see rural poverty then we don't we didn't see it right until very recently. We just didn't notice it or think about it. So it's like there's this there's this social liberalization, sugar high based on wealth that may or may not really exist. It's underlaid by a ton of inequality that's rumbling below the surface that can very well express itself in political upheaval. But people just wanted to have a good time. And that seemed that seemed to be the case heading into the 20s. But I don't know the pandemic

really has like thrown everything top mixed mixed mixed the narratives up 20. Yeah, the 20s were very people were at least publicly very enthusiastic and optimistic. And I don't think you can argue that about America today. So the actual closing question here is Lincoln is a president that's in on the pantheon of the great presidents, both at the, you know, historians rating presidents level and also just if you ask people in general, who are great presidents, like what what what does the term presidential greatness mean to you in the context of Lincoln?

Nobody's ever going to the exception of maybe Franklin Roosevelt, right? No president has since faced that challenge. So no, no president's been able to be tested that way, arguably.

But it's the ability to master the job to to understand in the moment how to how to work the levers of government, the machinery, how to guide public opinion, but not get so far ahead of it that you lose the thread, his ability to mold popular opinion, but also to perceive it his ability to gain credibility with the public that he could then use to become a master of the the different institutions of government. I mean, that he was almost unprecedented up until the time I'd argue, maybe Jackson, Washington and Jefferson had that capability as well, but the federal government was so small relative to what it became during the Civil War. But that that mastery and I'd argue FDR had that too. And maybe to some extent Reagan had that to the of that particularly that ability to not get so far ahead of public opinion, but at the same time to pull it along and guide it. And that gave them the capital to do the things they did. And I think that that Lincoln sets the process, you know, he's the standard bearer for that. And other people have either tried or failed to do it. And maybe they've had a moment when they've had the opportunity

to do it like FDR did. And it seems the tragedy of LBJ is that he has the ability to wield government at a literal level, but he does not have the ability to read or follow the thread of the public.

Never, never. He didn't have that touch. So that is an excellent place to leave things. Joshua, can you just shout out the book where we've talked about a lot of books here obviously, can you just shout out the new book and then the other two books we mentioned? It is called Lincoln's God Health, Faith, Transform the President and a Nation. And if you want to read a little bit more about Lincoln, Lincoln's boys, John Hay, John Nicolai and the War for Lincoln's Memory. And then the book we were just discussing, Building the Great Society, which looks at how instead of LBJ as master politician, looks at him as master of the presidency and the ways in which he built all of these programs in a short five year period during his presidency. Excellent. Thank you for joining me on the realignment. That was a pleasure. Thank you. 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. Great. See you all next time.