

[Transcript] The Realignment / 401 | Franklin Foer: Inside the Biden White House & the Struggle for America's Future

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

I hope everyone had a great long Labor Day weekend. Today's episode is one I've been really pumped to record. I'm speaking with Franklin Four, author of *The Last Politician*, inside Joe Biden's White House, and the struggle for America's future out today. I recommend a lot of books on this show, but given that we're almost a year out from the 2020 election, which increasingly looks like a rematch of the 2020 campaign between then President Trump and then former Vice President Joe Biden, *The Last Politician* is just at the top of my recommended list. Whether you oppose Biden's reelection or support him, Franklin's book does an excellent job of articulating the administration's biggest accomplishments and failures, Biden's strengths and weaknesses, and the unexpected themes and issues, especially on China and trade policy, that tie the Trump and Biden administrations together and separate them from the bipartisan pre-2015 consensus. A quick note, we've got another upcoming Re-alignment Ask Me Anything episode, so if you're a subscriber, send your questions in at the Re-alignment Supercast page, and if you would like to support the show but don't already subscribe, plus would like to get the exclusive content we offer subscribers, go to [Re-alignment.Supercast.com](https://re-alignment.com/supercast). Huge thanks to the Foundation for Reconnoation for supporting the work of this podcast.

Franklin Four, welcome to the Re-alignment. Pleasure to be with you.

Yeah, I'm really excited to speak with you. I think this book has done a great job of combining just the day-to-day reporting scoops while also having an underlying set of ideas that I think is actually deeply important, which I think if you're going to critique a lot of the Trump era books, it's that we got plenty of scoops, but the question of how much substance there was underneath the scoops version 15 was kind of up for debate, so let's just open the podcast with this question. The book is titled *The Last Politician*. What is a politician?

A politician is somebody who professionally commits themselves to this vocation where they throw themselves out to be elected into public office and then serve. The reason I used that title, that moniker, the politician, is because we live in this time of anti-politics.

Both Trump and Obama in various degrees were anti-politicians who ran against the system, who ran against the profession of politician. They were outsiders who really postured as movement leaders who claimed to have little respect for the institutions of government, and they wanted to break through these ossified institutions in order to enact systemic change that we hadn't seen in a long time. Biden is somebody who you can describe in any number of sorts of ways, but the one way which you're going to always describe him first is politician.

I remember I was thinking back to the first time that I spoke with Joe Biden when I was 24 years old. I was a cub reporter and I called him on the phone, and it was hard to get senators on the phone, but it wasn't hard to get Joe Biden on the phone. Even then, about three minutes into the conversation with him, I was like, can you get me off of this conversation? Because he's already descended into talking about stories from being in the Senate in 1972 and knowing Mike Mansfield, the majority leader in Hubert Humphrey, and he's this guy who's just wrapped up in all of this nostalgia for Washington as it existed in the past. There's something very atavistic about Joe Biden. It's not just that he's an old dude. It's that he's somebody who comes from this different time in American history. The faith that he espouses as a leader is that he can somehow help us recover some of what he believes has been lost over the course of the last decades. That may seem naive, and it probably is naive to some extent,

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but it's definitely a theory of the case. I'm actually not sure in the end that there's a better theory of the case out there. I'm glad you went right to the anti-politics aspect, because you're telling that anti-politics answer through the lens of Obama and Trump, but I think you should go back even further. I was born in 1992. My entire life has been defined by anti-politics. Whichever candidate was more political, more politician-y was the candidate that lost up until 2020. Think of George H. W. Bush versus outsider Bill Clinton and non-politician

Ross Perot. George W. Bush, he beats Ann Richards, the governor of Texas in 1994. In 2000, he beats

the sitting vice president. The real question for you here is, and I'm not asking this question in bad faith, those solicitors may take it that way, what do we have to show for 31 years of anti-politics? We've run an experiment that for this specific period of my entire life, for good or for ill, what do we have to show for it?

Well, I think we have declining faith in institutions. We have declining faith in the political process itself. We've gone through large periods of sclerosis, where we haven't been able to get very much done. In part, that's just the nature. I think of the divided government that the anti-politics contributes to throwing up. Because as part of the anti-politics, you're running its system, I think it exacerbates the winner-take-all mentality that we have in this country. It exacerbates the polarization because there's no working with the system if you hate the system. I guess the question then is, what's run the experiment one level deeper? If at those various points are articulated in the timeline, we stick with George H. W. Bush in 1992. We have Al Gore become president, not merely like George W. Bush,

Hillary Clinton over Obama in 08 or over Donald Trump in 2016. Do you think those declining trust, sclerotic institutions, partisanship, would we not have gotten to this point if we'd stuck with the status quo? I think anti-politics is probably a symptom of other things that have been happening in American society. I'm not entirely sure. Would income inequality, the financial crisis, all these other things that the Iraq war, all these other things that lead to declining trust in politicians and institutions where they have happened independently? We could counterfactual this all day long. It would be really fun. If Al Gore is elected, does the Iraq war happen? Arguably not. In Al Gore's second term, how do we respond to the financial crisis? I don't know. That's just the nature of counterfactuals. They're so much fun to run. I do think that there's a possibility that if we ran this out, it wouldn't culminate in Donald Trump getting elected in 2016. No, please go on. One of my favorite counterfactuals, and this is taking us a little bit off topic, but if Mitt Romney had been elected in 2012, I don't think that Donald Trump would have ever emerged on the scene. The reason why I just asked the counterfactual is because I'm trying to, and this is, I think, with some of your book conveys helpfully, understand at a core level what Joe Biden is in this political sense. I was going to ask you this question a little later, but there's been all this talk of Bidenomics and we're in this post-New Liberalism moment, stuff that you and I have conducted over before. Yet, I'm not quite sure how bought into or where Joe Biden is into that project in the same way that there are always books about Trumpism and Andrew Jackson and how much of that was just Trump having instincts that aligned in certain ways. So I think that that's kind of what a politician is to me. A person who has instincts,

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who has like a baseline of knowledge, and a politician has tactics and approaches and strategies separated from the idea. So kind of riff on that. Yeah. So I think that when you look at Joe Biden, Joe Biden is a constellation of things, I think values is a very important plot. It's a very important element of what makes for a political leader, a successful political leader, that if he was more steeped in post-New Liberalism, I don't think that he would have necessarily accomplished all of the things that he was able to accomplish, pushing the country into maybe a different direction of political economy. But because he doesn't think about the world theoretically. He wouldn't go to a Hewlett Foundation conference on post-New Liberalism. In fact, you would probably think that it was a pretentious waste of time on some level. But you take something like the care economy, which is a signature piece of the progressive agenda about childcare and elder care and the like. And he arrives at his conclusions because he's had his own experience of being a dad who's had kids who've needed care. And I think that there's certain ways in which he's able to empathize with problems that allows him to accept certain solutions, which may be a bit outside of what had, you know, where the Overton window had been opened before. So the way that you phrase the question is the way that I really like it, like who is Joe Biden? I think that you have these values, you have these instincts, and you have these tactics. You have a guy who is deeply psychological in the way that he thinks about his fellow politicians and he thinks about foreign leaders that makes him, I think, an effective negotiator. And in some ways, it's part of his inherent centrism, like his ability to find the middle with Kevin McCarthy or with certain European leaders or with Modi in India. A lot of that is that he's able to sit across from them and see the limits of what they're able to politically do themselves. What are the constraints that their parties have imposed on them, that their electorates have imposed on them? What psychologically do they want out of a deal? One of my favorite stories in the book was that he was dealing with Randy Weingarten, the head of the Teachers Union during the Obama administration. And she was upset because a school district in Rhode Island had just fired a bunch of teachers. And Obama had praised the school district for firing those teachers. But then a week later, Biden's with her at the AFL-CIO Executive Conference in Miami and Weingarten's getting mad at Biden and Biden's getting mad back at Weingarten. And he's moving in her direction and he's chastising her. And she thinks that Secret Service is going to have to intervene because Joe Biden's about to physically assault her. And then he gets up into her grill and whispers into her ear, don't worry, we'll work this out. And on the one hand, if we're just to use this typology of the politician, it's what people don't trust about politicians is that they'll say one thing in public and then do another thing in private. On the other hand, when you're mediating differences in society, to be able to understand that there's an element of theater always to public disagreements and to hold out this faith that if we get in the room and we sit down and we can kind of more rationally, calmly work through an issue will arrive at a conclusion. I mean, that's politics. That's democracy. It is so ugly and messy. And to some degree, it is reprehensible. But on the other hand, it's the thing that we've totally disrespected and we've dropped this series of techniques as a society. And we've stopped valuing them. And to the extent that I think that one of the great lessons of the Biden presidency is that these things that we associate with this other era are still things that we need in order to have a functioning system in the present. I actually appreciated the Randy Weingarten anecdote in the book, in the sense that it really gets to the core of how

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we should understand Biden's vice presidency and his presidency. Because on the one hand, part of his job as vice president, he's very explicit about this, is he is Barack Obama's vice president. He is there to serve the administration's agenda. And if you attack Barack Obama, he's obviously going to defend him very aggressively. On the other hand, and you see this in the Afghanistan withdrawal debate back in 2009 to 2011, he has his own personal instincts. He's much more sympathetic towards the, let's just say, teachers union side of the public's K through 12 debate versus the more 2000, 2010s, like, oh, we're the Democratic Party. We're more in favor of reform, charter schools, et cetera. And we now see this in the presidency. So let me just ask you then about the elephant in the room. And we're not just saying this at a vibes level that's borne out very aggressively in the polling. In the book, in the stories you tell, I don't get the sense that aside from public performance, Joe Biden's age, frailty, and eloquence, et cetera, are actually that important in terms of what's actually happening. The decisions he's driving, whether it's the Afghanistan withdrawal, whether it's making his consensus view on how we're going to arm Ukraine, but not go too far. He's doing the very personal negotiation. It seems at a very deep level, he is entirely there separate from whether we agree if the decisions are not. Right, right. So first of all, I don't think we can dissociate entirely the aesthetic political part of the age question from the substantive part of it. So if there is a weakness in the Biden administration that stems from his age, it's the fact that he's not an energetic political leader. And some of that is by design. I think he wanted to cool the temperature after Trump, and so he didn't want to make everything about him. He wanted to give the nation space to be able to think about something other than politics for a period in order it's part of the healing process after the Trump years. But on the other hand, I do think that when it comes to explaining the things that he's accomplished or justifying his decisions, the fact that he's not energetic and that the public isn't able to connect with him because of his age, I think that that is a very relevant part of his presidency and something that you can't just write off. But what you're saying, and I believe to be true based on the conversations that I had, and believe me, I scoured for this, is are there episodes or instances when cognitive decline or age interfered with his governing? And I wasn't able to find them. I think that when it comes to decision-making, age is this double-edged thing. On the one hand, it does make him this less energetic leader. On the other hand, there is the benefit of wisdom and experience. And I think that the Joe Biden that exists now, who is in a lot of ways a much chiller fellow than the guy who was vice president or senator, he's not somebody who needs to hear his voice all of the time, which is what he'd been for most of his career. I think age has kind of mellowed him and that some of his insecurities have settled down. And there are instances like Afghanistan where conventional wisdom is bearing down on him. Media elites are saying, you're a fool and you're incompetent. And I think the Joe Biden of past decades might have been worried about what he read in a Tom Friedman column, or what he'd read in a David Brooks column. But the guy who's lived through all this, I think, is obviously mad when he reads those things, but less swayed by them. And so I think one of the benefits of age with Joe Biden is that he just sticks to his guns. That's what happens to a lot of people when they age. It becomes harder to move them in argument. But I think in his instance, I think it's been pretty effective in shielding him from a lot of the vicissitudes of the media world we live in where people get upset about things that are relatively trivial. And rather

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than letting, getting spun up about all those things, he's able to brush them aside. Yeah. And I think, as I'm thinking about this, a very clear area where his age and eloquence has been, I think, particularly devastating for the administration is just their inability, I think, to popularize or articulate what they're doing. So for example, earlier in the episode, you said care economy. I do this for a living. I barely know what the care economy is, right? Like, I met Heather Brache. I barely knew what she was talking about. And once again, this is my literal day job. Everything from the Bidenomics aspects. And the thing that's frustrating, I think, if you're a Biden person, is that in so many ways, his old reputation, Scranton Joe, not Ivy League, able to articulate things in a way that's comprehensive, understandable, has just been totally lost. Like, think of like Jake Sullivan, you know, the national security advisor, and the conversation around like the foreign policy for the middle class for so long, we focused on what was happening in, let's say, like Beijing or Europe or the developing world and not what was happening on Main Street. That conversation, which I think is very substantive and very interesting, and I appreciate your portrayal of Jake Sullivan trying to work through that. I do not think there are basically 10 voters in this country that understand that that's happening. So here's my real question for you. Why is the modern Democratic Party that isn't in the socialist side of things? Because I think they're capable of articulating this. Why can center left Democrats not articulate their basic thoughts? I don't know if I would describe it quite so forcefully as that. I think what you're describing about the administration is clearly true, that they haven't been able to break through and articulate their agenda. I think that some of it does relate back to even as they're transcending certain foundations of technocratic policy making, and they're trying to break through from some outdated paradigms that they feel like that they've been imprisoned by or maybe Washington has been imprisoned by, they're not really, they're still, they fight an insider's game. It's about, it's very easy for them to say, all right, it's too soon to message this, we need to get it done. And then they get trapped in technocratic problem solving. And look, we both know that there is this problem of green lanternism that a lot of Democrats possess, which is that they expect their political leaders to be superheroes. And I think the fact that Obama was such an extraordinary order in some ways ruined our expectations for what a president should be. And the fact that Biden is not a great order doesn't mean that he's not good at governing. But the fact that he's good at governing doesn't mean that he's an effective politician all the time. And that it really is, I think age, I think is an incredibly important part of this. But it's more than that, as you're suggesting, which is that you should be able to cut ads that clearly explain things. You should have surrogates in the opinion pages of the country and in the halls of Congress who were able to reduce your political program to slogans that are comprehensible. And even by dynamics as a shorthand, I think is inadequate. That by dynamics suggests that inflation is not as rampant as we thought it was and the unemployment rate is low, when really there's a constellation of political ideas and policies and attempt to do something, I think, pretty fresh embedded in it. And nobody stitches it together within the administration. Nobody theorizes what they're doing at even the intellectual level, let alone the political messaging level that we're discussing. Something I'm curious about in reading your book, maybe think of this critique I saw that was put out by a European EU policy type who's aligned with the administration but frustrated. He basically said his problem, this is Bruno Maasai, for less than years he's been on the show before, he said

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that his problem with the Biden administration is that Joe Biden, because he's a senator, conceives of the talent within his administration as fundamentally being, these are my aides. I am the principal, these are my aides, their job is to do this, this or that. And as we're thinking about this issue of generational changes, we're thinking about the inability to articulate or demonstrate energy, I've just been kind of shocked in your book how little figures like Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg play in contrast to what's said during like a FDR presidency, which you could compare of us to in certain respects where you have Wendell Wilkie, you have Harry Hopkins, you have these figures who are very much obviously under FDR, but they're treated as like quasi-independent actors at the same time too. It seems that Joe Biden could treat senators as almost co-equals be as a hard time elevating voices that are normally under him that in many ways could do a better job than he could. Mike, what would you think of that critique?

I'm just reminded of something that Joe Tony Blinken made Secretary of State when he was staff director for Biden on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and he said that only one of those two words was true. In other words, he was staff, but he wasn't directing anything. It was Joe Biden was the guy who was the real director, and it is an interesting element.

And somewhat surprising fact about Joe Biden is that he does throw himself in the weeds of basically everything, that he's a micromanager, he's somebody who prepares probably too intensely for his own good when he goes out and talks with the public because there's this insecurity undergirding. I think a lot of his public presentation, he doesn't want to be seen as stupid. He wants to have complete command of the subject at hand, and when it comes to something like a baby formula shortage, it's just amazing how much time and attention he devotes to technocratic problem solving. And I do think that he probably would be well-served by relying on some of these cabinet secretaries to be surrogates. But on the other hand, I think he does do quite a bit of it, and I'm not sure that that's the fundamental problem. And we're talking about stuff on the margins. Could Buttigieg go out and do a couple more Fox News appearances? Of course, he probably could, and that would probably be marginally effective, but I'm not sure it would change anything in a fundamental sort of way. So this is where we can get very technical and precise, because this is where I have a slight disagreement with you. It seems like, because you kind of referenced, what's the fundamental problem here? It seems to me the fundamental political problem for the Biden administration is that the vibes are off. Despite the economic numbers, I think despite how we're going through the history here together, and if you're reading the book, how in command of the issues Joe Biden has been, that is just not at all clear. And I think my argument, and I'm looking to think of Reagan's presidency in many ways, where Reagan is almost as old as Joe Biden, he clearly isn't, I think he's much more disengaged than Joe Biden has been at his worst. Yet at the same time, because he was capable of stage managing and projecting a very specific aura slide from the administration, he didn't suffer for those political consequences. I think if you did have more energy around eat Buttigieg or Kamala Harris, etc, etc, etc, etc, it would get at the lack of energy that comes from the administration, which seems to be the fundamental problem. So you could disagree. I think I like the way that you phrased it, though. In terms of solutions, I'm not sure I agree. But in terms of diagnosis, I do think I agree that the vibes are off does seem right to me in terms of capturing things. And I'm thinking a lot out

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here. But part of Joe Biden being the last politician is that there's these two parts of politics that we've been talking about. There is the legislative and governing part, and then there is the election hearing and messaging part of it. And there's part of this, I think the first part, the legislative and governing part, I think he actually deeply enjoys. And then with the messaging part, I think he enjoys that as well, but that there's also part of him that doesn't enjoy it as much. That if you're a guy who's been on the Senate, foreign relations committee for your entire life, dealing with Putin and Zelensky and Modi, that is in some ways kind of the peak of your career. And being leader of the free world happens to be a very fun job if you love foreign policy. Whereas going on, doing an interview on 60 Minutes or going and stumping, it's like, I think the age comes into it. But then there's also it's less fun for him probably on some level, if that makes sense. But your diagnosis is totally right that there's this weird inability to get the vibes right. Yeah. And I think that to your pushback to my critique, I was playing this out in my head, few things would be more embarrassing than the White House bringing me in as a consultant. They're like, okay, Marshall, you're the genius solvent. I'm like, have Pete Buttigieg do more Sunday shows, as if that's going to solve the problem. I'm imagining the crickets as I'm quickly escorted. It's like, you didn't think anyone thought of that at least two or three years ago. Okay. So then here's another thing about this, though. I think I'm a terrible political consultant too. Every time I've prognosticated in print about what I think the ideal political outcome is, I think I tend to just do something that I end up regretting six months later. But when I wrote this book, part of this was just an anti-Trump thing and a desire as a journalist to lift the state of Trump off of my own self, was to write about governing. And to me, legislating foreign policy, dealing with pandemics, all of this is, to me, it's the most interesting thing in the world. And if I couldn't write about that in a tense sort of way that captures the drama that policymakers actually experience these things, and if I couldn't make them as sexy as I possibly could, then I feel like I would have failed as a journalist. And so that was really my aspiration in doing this. And I think in the book, I don't spend that much time diagnosing the politics largely not just because I don't think I'm very good at it, but also because it's ephemeral. Political conditions change every couple of hours. And so I could diagnose something that was wrong with the politicking, but that's just not going to stand the test of the new cycle, let alone the test of the cycle that I'd hope my book would exist on a shelf. No. And I mean this totally seriously. And this is why I just really recommend that folks don't just read the scoops when they come out on book releases, but actually read this book. You have a quick chapter where you just go into how, with Build Back Better, the inclusion of Joe Manchin's name, which was entirely thought of as good faith. They're just like, oh, we negotiate with, you know, Kirsten Sinema is off the table, so we're still negotiating with Joe Manchin. So in this press release, we're going to describe what's happening. They include that and that ends up deeply insulting Senator Manchin and causing that problem. I think that's your core of what governing is. Just thinking about like, hey, the core thing that you are doing if you are a staffer, if you're a politician, and these negotiations are thinking to yourself, what's in his or her head? How does this really play out? I think that's the definition of what you're going for if you're trying to capture governance and what that looks like. Yeah. That's right. That there is all of this psychology and all of this contingency that gets built into the outcome of pretty significant things. So that

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if, you know, I don't think history turns on Joe Manchin's name being present in that press release because Joe Manchin clearly was uncomfortable with the fundamental direction of that bill and he was getting dragged along to a place that he didn't want to go. And so he was looking for, he was looking for an out. And so that provided him with a convenient moment to escape.

But it is worth pondering. Like if his name had been included, was there any chance that improbably Joe Biden could have pulled him over the line and kind of forced him to swallow, you know, hundreds of billions of dollars of social spending that he didn't especially want, it's possible. I think the next question you quote Biden is believing, especially in, you know, the first two years that a huge part of his legacy would just be the response to COVID. And that just kind of got me thinking, how, and I don't want you to, I'm not asking this in a unfortunate hypothetical level, how differently would we understand Joe Biden's presidency if after he elect, got elected, so like not a gimmick of, I'm going to do a one term presidency like John McCain thought about doing in 2008, but actually just got real, got elected, said we're going to return to normalcy, I'm going to solve COVID, I'm going to build this bridge to the next generation of democratic politicians. And then we're going to have an open field in 2023-2024. How differently would we understand this story if he'd left that option open?

Yeah, I mean, if he'd been since an Addis and he returned to his farm after his years of service, like I do think that that would transform the way that people would think about him because for starters, it would have, I think that one of the things that I think is that trails Biden through his career is the sense that he's somehow, he's a vain egotistical politician, which of course he is because that's just in some ways par for the course for the people who follow this track in their lives. And there would be something incredibly selfless about that. I think also everything in our country and everything in our politics is overshadowed by this question of Trump. And so the way in which the Biden presidency will ultimately be evaluated is whether he beats Trump in 2024. And so he could have depressurized that fact about his career by simply calling it from the narrative. And yet there would be this possibility that whoever won the 2024 Democratic primary would still lose to Trump and we'd still end up blaming Biden for whatever. If only Biden had run, he was so popular during that period where he'd said he wasn't going

to run for president, he could have saved us from authoritarianism. So I love toying around with these counterfactuals and I do think that they're valuable to an extent, but part of the fun of the counterfactual is that there is no right or wrong answer. Well, and this is the thing and this is why it's a useful counterfactual because it gets at I think the central claim of the book, which is that Joe Biden, the reason why Joe Biden hits differently now when he did in 2008 or 1988 is that Joe Biden is the last of his breed with a very specific skill set. So it's not just that if you take Joe Biden off the table in 2024, you're not having Joe Biden, Joe Biden, the specific personality, it's like you actually lose a very specific set of skills and abilities I think he has. I mean, at the end of the day, so much of what helps Joe Biden is the fact that people just seem as a cultural moderate. So much of what helps him get through COVID. I think the anecdote that I always just come back to when I try to explain Joe Biden to folks as much as I can as an outsider is just how during summer 2020, like when young Gen Z staffers don't want him to reference Thomas Jefferson in his speech because of the conversation we're having

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about racism, he's just sort of like, no, we're just going to do it. That is a political ability, that is a politician's ability to be able to weigh and balance like, look, we're going to select a black woman as the VP, we're going to win South Carolina, I have this coalition, I have black voters, but there's a line that we're not going across here because I need to be a cultural moderate. I think that so much for me is what kind of defines his specific skill set during this period. And there are just so many people who are in political roles today who I don't think have the ability to make those balances and therefore either undershoot or overshoot. It's also the context which is that the culture itself has started to lose faith in the ability of politics to mediate differences. Understandably, when we're so polarized, it's hard to believe that there's any way out of this polarization, any way to cross this divide, let alone through the techniques of persuasion and compromise, which are the things that Joe Biden, I think, most fundamentally believes in at the end of the day. And so it's not just that he has this technical expertise, it's that he has this spiritual faith, I think, that makes him the last politician. So for this last section, we're going to pivot away from vibes and actually just get into the policy because you actually go through the specific areas of relevance. I want to start with China. I really appreciated your initial articulation of how when the Chinese first met with the Biden administration, they brought briefing books from 2015-2016 under, I think, the very reasonable expectation that, look, here's how we should understand the Trump presidency in America in 2021. There is this weird moment, stuff got crazy, we're back to where we were in 2016. But I think very clearly, speaking both at a principles level to the Joe Biden level, Joe Biden's America and Joe Biden's Democratic Party, we set up an administration level, is different than where Obama left things with China. Help us understand this dynamic. Yeah, Obama was at this moment where there was still this old faith in the ability to, if you will, just domesticate China by introducing China to the global buffet of capitalism, that China would become this different nation, that they would start to believe in bourgeois values, that they would become less nationalistic. And that faith was already starting to decline by the end of the Obama administration. I think some of Obama's initial faith in that had started to decline. But Joe Biden was kind of a dissident within the Obama administration on that count because he was closer to the unions. He was, even if he was never totally aligned with the unions, he was the guy on the inside unions would come to and complain to. And so I think he started to hear from them about unfair Chinese trade practices. And so he was already by 2016 at a place where he was disconnected from Obama policy on China. And then you have Trump's election happen where Trump gets so much political mileage out of bashing China. And I think for a lot of elite insiders in the Democratic Party, there was this moment of reflection. Why is Trump getting so much mileage out of this issue? Did we get this wrong? And then there's just simple facts on the ground between the Uyghurs, between what China did to Hong Kong, between just a shift in the intellectual view of what China meant to the global economy and to the U.S. economy. All these things conspired to create circumstances where you have a lot more continuity between Trump and Biden than you do between Biden and Obama. The tariffs stay in place. And when the Biden administration comes

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into place, you're describing a meeting that took place where the China hands from the Biden administration go into the Chinese embassy and they start to plan the first meeting that takes place in Anchorage, Alaska, where Jake Sullivan and Tony Blinken were going to go fly and meet with their counterparts. And the idea of that meeting was that Blinken and Sullivan were going to deliver some tough new realities to the Chinese to show them that this wasn't just a reversion to the Obama administration. And the Chinese were initially, I think, very unprepared and very reluctant to accept that there would be this change. And in Anchorage, Blinken and Sullivan both start to lecture the Chinese about what's happened. And then the Chinese kind of tear up all of their notes, all of their pre-prepared speeches, and they respond by throwing punches of their own at the United States. And the hard thing for Biden throughout all of this has been that he's trying to thread a needle. He doesn't want there to be a new Cold War with China, but he wants to ratchet up the pressure on China. He wants to contain China. He wants to reorient Grand Stranded Strategy so that we build up all of these alliances around China, whether it's what he's done recently with the South Koreans and the Japanese, or his attempt to flip Modi into the US camp, or what the AUKUS stuff that he's done, where he's created a new alignment with a new security arrangement with the Australians and the British. All of this is significant. All of this is Graham's strategy, but he doesn't want it to go too far because he knows that that's very dangerous. In fact, it's one of my biggest concerns about what possibly comes next after Biden, that if we live in this moment of real tension where Graham's strategy has been reoriented, where everybody is going up to the brink, but trying desperately to restrain themselves, if you have different political leaders, and I'm not just saying just Trump, I think it's possible that you could have Democrats who could easily botch this as well by either ratcheting down tension too much or ratcheting up tension too much, and I think that they've done a pretty decent job of walking the line where they haven't veered into dangerous territory. When they see the lights starting to flash red, they start to pull back, and I appreciate that about them. Yeah, and look, I'm full disclosure, decently hawkish on a lot of the Biden administration, China questions, but I do want to understand a contradiction in your understanding of Joe Biden's intentions. On the one hand, you're saying he doesn't want a Cold War II. On the other hand, you're talking about containment, and if I'm Chinese, that's a tomato-tomato situation. This gets to how it's a difficult balance to unpack the awkwardness of that what you just stated. Yeah, I think that as an analytical matter, Biden lived through the Cold War and is very reluctant to stamp this conflict as Cold War II.0, because he knows the ramifications of that both domestically, but also the ways in which that leads to proxy wars, it leads to nuclear fears. He wants to be realistic about China, because there is this possibility that they invade Taiwan. It's pretty clear that they've made these investments in their military over time that demand a response. It's also very clear that Chinese trade practices are bad for the American worker, bad for American firms, and his job as president is to stand up for the American worker and American firms. It's just a model. What you point to is a real model. I think that we probably are much closer to Cold War II.0 than he's game to acknowledge, yet I'm sympathetic to his reasoning for not wanting to slap that label onto where we're at, if that makes sense. I want to give you a compliment, because I'm not kidding. This is the first time I've heard that dilemma articulated. This is where the age issue comes in, because once again, I'm born in 1992. A lot of the analysts and people in question are increasingly born in the late

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70s or even the mid-80s. For us, the Cold War is this like, it's a period, it's a descriptor. The post-war era, the Cold War era, and we're in the second Cold War era. If you're Joe Biden and you're literally a silent generation member, the word Cold War is actually much more closer to the Cuban Missile Crisis or Hungary or Vietnam and Indochina than it is to our more not disinterested, but our just purely theoretical things. I think that's so helpful. Thank you. It actually helps me understand a little better. I might, with Ukraine, just to segue. I also have a very hawkish view on Ukraine, and there have been moments where I've gotten really frustrated with the Biden administration. Why haven't you given them the F-16s? Why? Ukraine asks for these weapon systems. Why haven't we delivered them? The truth is, is that this is art, not science. You don't know, you don't know how to reading Vladimir Putin's intentions, understanding his willingness to escalate is something that you can use your espionage capabilities to try to get as much information as you can about him, but there is this limit because you're dealing with human emotions and you're dealing with psychology. As leader of the United States, as leader of the free world, it's Biden's responsibility to be the one who also is sweating about the possibilities of nuclear escalation. I would ask this question, in meetings about Ukraine, how does Biden weigh in? What are the questions that he asks? The question he always asks is, if I give them this weapon system, what are the risks? How will the Russians respond if we do that? That's one of the right questions to ask. It's not the only right question to ask. The other question to ask is, how will the system help the Ukrainians actually win the war? There's so much emotionalism around giving the Ukrainians F-16s, giving them different weapon systems, that it's his job to strip away the emotions and to not just be pulled into conflicts because it feels good or that he'll get praised by the right columnist or the right TV pundits. It's his job to consider all the dimensions of the problem and to really sweat nuclear war. I want my president sweating the possibility of nuclear war, even as he's sweating the possibility of an authoritarian triumph. Yeah, and I think everything you just said gets at the title of this podcast, which is the realignment. It seems that there are very few hard to make predictions coming out of a fractious moment in American political history, but I think a prediction to be more of an uncomfortable putting serious money on is just that Joe Biden, for greater or for ill, is essentially affecting a realignment of the political parties on foreign policy. It's impossible to see the fact that the more establishment Mitch McConnell, Lindsey Graham side of the right when it comes to Ukraine policy,

I think our long-term win and lose those battles. My other prediction, and you saw this in Vivek Ramaswamy doing his trial balloon of like after 2028, we're going to magically be semi-conductor independent and essentially abandoned Taiwan to China. People dunk on him, but I think that's actually a logical continuation of the Marjorie Taylor Greene JD Vance position on Ukraine policy. I guess the question for you would be just how do you understand? If we went back 10 years ago, I think you would say it's crazy that you're on a podcast saying, oh yeah, I'm more hawkish on Russia-Ukraine questions. That's kind of what I'm getting at.

I mean, for me personally, I've always been a little bit more hawkish than I think members of my own party, but I do think that Ukraine is interesting. Ukraine happens after the 2016 election and after this new frame gets imposed on American foreign policy, which is it's about the battle between authoritarianism and democracy. And for Joe Biden, the connections between fighting authoritarianism at home and fighting authoritarianism abroad are very clear,

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explicit and consistent. And I think that that's helped bring the base of his party along on foreign policy issues where they've gone to places that they probably would have been theoretically reluctant to go. I mean, this is a party that was anti-Iraq war and it's now pro-Ukraine war. And I think that that transformation really has to do with the ideological superstructure as much as anything else. Yeah. So in our last 10 minutes, I want to hit all of the greatest hits here really. So we kind of mentioned the debate around Bidenomics. What is your assessment of Bidenomics as a political economy project? Yeah. This is another place where I find myself surprised that I grew up having a group in a world where industrial policy was anathema and I would not have gone there. Even in 2020, when Bill Beckbetter was first starting to emerge, I was pretty dismissive of industrial policy as being one of the core pillars of Bidenomics, of whatever was next to come in the Democratic Party. And I think a couple things have changed. One was the pandemic, where you have all these supply chain shocks. And so there's this case for resiliency that gets made that I think is probably not the biggest deal in the world. You should be able to be resilient in Black Swan events, but I'm not sure I would favor building an entire economy around Black Swan events. But you do have, I think so, for me, with industrial policy, I've come become much more sympathetic to it on a couple grounds. One is national security, that it does feel like the possibilities of China invading Taiwan sometime in the coming decades is plausible enough that we need to cover our bases. I think that I've always been somebody who's been very sympathetic to antitrust, that's been my progressive hobby horse. And I think that when I look at the global trading system, I can see the ways in which they've taken the analysis of domestic antitrust and applied it internationally, that there are some pretty dangerous choke points in the global economy, because you have market power that's become too concentrated, primarily in one country, and that that is just long-term not great for consumers and long-term not in the same sort of way you don't want a powerful corporation to have too much power over a market or a political system. I think China's concentration of economic power is dangerous politically, and that if there are ways in which we can become less dependent on that, I think it's incredibly valuable. And then you have the clean energy question. And Obama started to set the template for this with his stimulus package, where he did engage in small-scale industrial policy to great effect, that solar prices started to drop pretty dramatically after the initial subsidies and tax breaks that came with his recovery package. And so there's some proof of concept there. And I'm also very interested in the political effects over the long run that come from this investment. I think it's a lot of people have noted it's largely directed to red states or purple states. And it'll be very interesting to see what happens. I don't think that workers are suddenly going to become loyal to the Democratic Party because of some bill that nobody knows about, named the Inflation Reduction Act. But I do think that you're going to end up having, with the creation of these factories and plants in places like Phoenix and in Georgia, the construction of what they call, and the way it has the battery belt that's emerging in sunbelt places, is you'll have a lot of professionals and engineers and college educated workers going to red states and going to purple states. And I think that there is, there's going to be migration that in an evenly divided country, it's going to have some political spillover. So that's actually the perfect pivot to my last two or so questions here. So number one, I like to do this thing when I have an author I've known about for a while.

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Your book, *How Soccer Explains the World*, was a Hanukkah present for me. It's actually, I think it was like the first real book my parents ever gave me. And that book is about globalization. So I think so much of a way we can understand the last 10 minutes of this episode and the part that ties to Trump is just how the Democratic and Republican parties are responding to a post-globalization moment. So can you, as an author, really cut your teeth in that space? We'd love for you to unpack that yourself. Yeah. I think when I wrote that book, I was skeptical of some of the promises of globalization. One of the themes of that book is that local cultures, local allegiances, we're never going to fully disappear in a globalized sort of way, and that it would constantly reassert themselves. And I think that that's happening in American political economy to some extent, that rather than just allowing ourselves to be subsumed by a global supply chain and part of a global culture, there is this desire to assert some American role, American predominance in this system, not just to fade away. And the Trump part of it, you see the cultural desire to reassert a sense of national identity, which I think is, in some ways, an entirely predictable response to globalization. It's a very human response to globalization, to want to maintain the things that make you distinctive. And then, with bidenomics on an economic level, you have this desire to, it's also a form of self-assertion, this desire to revive American manufacturing, to not be entirely dependent on this abstract system. And so maybe Sacher does explain bidenomics in the end.

He said the words. Okay, so final question. We've been through a million different cycles of trying to relate Joe Biden to different eras. So at the start of his presidency, it's 1932 he's FDR. When inflation and energy prices are out of control, it's Jimmy Carter. And now with bidenomics, it's morning in America again. Whether or not you reject the idea of imposing eras on presidents as a means of... What's the most fun? Let's do it. Where is your understanding of where we are in the history rhymes part of where are we in the Biden administration? Right. I do think that I think Reagan is probably the closest that you're going to get where you have somebody who who is ushering in a new paradigm of political economy. And to the extent that Trump was kind of the Jimmy Carter of this realignment, where he's the guy who came in, who shattered a lot of old pieces of conventional wisdom, who began to redirect the country in new sorts of ways, but was unable to do so in a way that was...

A little bit of a pretty sustainable or ideologically totally coherent. Biden picks up those ruins and starts to take it in a different direction. And I do think that bidenomics will be the political economy that guides the country over the course of the next generation, whether it's the industrial policy, which I don't see us retreating from anytime soon, or it's kind of his version of populism with the antitrust and the trade policy.

It's coherent. There's some buy-in from both sides of the political system here. And it's a question of who gets to shape it. Is it going to be shaped in a Trumpian direction, or will it be shaped in the kind of the more cosmopolitan internationalist direction that Joe Biden is inclined to take it? Ending with an open question is actually a great way to put things. So, Franklin, can you just shout the book out real quick for listeners who want to pick up a copy? It's called *The Last Politician*. My name is Franklin Ford, F-O-E-R. Is that the type of shout that you were looking for? Oh, yeah, the title of the book. Because people are just like listening, they're not actually scrolling in the show notes as well, too. Yeah. Yeah. Well, I mean, just as a personal matter, it was really, I've never done an insider book like this. And in fact,

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I probably began this process with a lot of negative preconceptions about insider books, maybe some of which were confirmed in the course of my writing and producing it. But I also ended up with a lot more respect for the whole genre of chronicling of presidency in this very raw sort of way, where you don't know when you begin, when I began this book, I didn't know how it would end. And so when you don't know how a book is going to end, you aren't even sure what the real narrative is over time. And you have to just go into this mode of ubiquitous capture, where you're just absorbing as much as you can. And you're also trying to make the judgments of a historian, because so much of our political conversation is ephemeral. It's about things that don't actually matter, six months from now, let alone six years from now. And so having to make those judgments in real time nearly broke my brain. But it was incredibly fun to do. It was just somebody who loves politics and who cares about policy. There was something actually restorative for me about spending the time working on this project. Man, look, I'll close with this. It was actually useful because, A, there are so few leaks in this administration that you actually, it's actually helpful. In contrast to the Trump administration or everything, you could just refresh the Washington Post every morning. You basically get the sense that here, this is a tremendously useful book. So I recommend this for folks. Franklin, thank you for joining me on the realignment. Thank you. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like this 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 rates. See you all next time.