

Marshawn Sager here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

We're doing something a little different today. A bunch of folks wrote in with questions for me and Sager to go over and have a bit of discussion on. We're going to focus on both the Afghanistan pullout, the anniversary, especially because this episode is coming after my 11th anniversary yesterday and the broader discussion of Joe Biden's presidency that comes out of my interview with Franklin Four. Around halfway into that discussion, we're going to transition to the Supercast Exclusive Edition of that conversation, where we respond to Supercast subscriber Q&A. If you would like to hear the full version of that conversation, you can go to [realignment.supercast.com](https://realignment.supercast.com) or click the link at the top of the show notes. And then after that, whether or not you are a Supercast subscriber, I had a great interview with Coco Kroom. She is a really interesting author who is looking at this issue of optimization and how a society focused on optimizing everything to death actually created a bunch of problems and vulnerabilities. It's definitely not a policy book. It's more of a theoretical meditation, which I think it's great to add to her rotations of focusing on this efficiency issue. So I hope you all enjoy both this discussion episode, the Q&A, if you are a subscriber, and of course, my interview with Coco.

Marshall and Sager here. We're doing our AMA Supercast discussion episodes. We're going to do a bit of open discussion, especially highlighting some points people wanted us to room it in on for a bit. And then of course, we'd like to get access to the full conversation. But before we get into the episode today, you can go to [realignment.supercast.com](https://realignment.supercast.com) or click the link at the top of the show notes. So first thing I wanted to discuss with you, Sager, is just the state of the Biden presidency. I had Franklin Foran last week really enjoyed the book he put out, *The Last Politician*. It is actually a good chronicle of two years. It's not really like the gossipy Trump era books we've gotten used to. I genuinely learned something from it, but that said, like it's definitely not going to sell a lot because as Politico has articulated in the past week or so, Biden books have been a disaster from a sales perspective. This one came out last year. It's called *The Long Alliance* by Gabriel D'Benedetti of New York Magazine. It's about Biden and Obama and we sold 1,500 copies, one of which was a copy I purchased. I feel like a sucker there. So it's kind of crazy how few books those sell. But yeah, I would just love you to kind of like go into, I'm sorry, you've seen some of the four of reporting. I read the book. I read most of it. And not all of it. I'm most, I think three fourths done. I actually don't like the book. I think it is good reporting, bad writing. I think it's very biased kind of it's in presentation. And this isn't like an anti-Biden critique. It's more so like, I think I got good reporting, but I think that the packaging of it is just so like, like capital L liberal. It actually makes it very difficult. I think he did himself a disservice actually by writing it that way. I have a similar critique like of like Jonathan Alter's biography of Jimmy Carter, was just a nakedly partisan at times for literally no reason. You know, like, dude, like I'm trying to read a biography. I don't need you to put in like a line about how Trump sucks in the middle of Jimmy Carter biography. I found it similar in terms of its packaging. I mean, yeah, I think it was an okay portrait of Biden himself. I got a better understanding of like what makes him tick, particularly whenever he's in his older age. The main thing that really came through is that to me, the worst parts of Joe Biden have basically the best, the worst and

the best parts of Biden have been dramatically exacerbated by his old age. So the worst parts of Joe Biden are his insecurities. He is deeply insecure because of the plagiarism scandal in 1980s refuses to elevate and to, you know, empower like genuine deputies and to instill a sense of like managerial confidence with people who work for him. A lot of people work from kind of scared of him, which is pathetic, honestly. At the same time, he's got like the worst of all worlds where he's both managed by a staff, but also like buffs at being managed by staff. The best part of Biden is that he rejects any of the modern framing of the Democratic Party that he finds like very toxic, and he feels more comfortable in his elderly age to actually push back against some of it, not on a staffing level or a policy level per se, but definitely whenever it comes to a rhetorical level. So yeah, I mean, I think you just colored in the lines of some of the things that I thought about it, but actually I really didn't like, I really didn't like book or did not like it. That's interesting. Yeah, I think the, I like your kind of separation from the biography aspect, from the pure reporting aspect, because look, here's another problem. I still think Joe Biden is a particularly interesting person. So I actually just wouldn't purchase a Biden biography in the first place, which once again is separate from the degree to which this is a capital L liberal book. But there were a couple of anecdotes that I think really put to mind the strengths and weaknesses of the presidency. So number one, and this is a point that goes to your argument around Biden just not being able to empower people. There's this anecdote about how Biden is frustrated that in his old age and just the current media environment, people are just unwilling to see the amount of prep and focus he's putting into things. So for example, during the baby formula crisis, Biden would just spend hours with the briefing books, learning the issue, putting together a serious plan of his team, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And Biden's just sort of like, we did our plan, we're not talking about why am I not getting rewarded for it. And he just doesn't understand that like he is not in office because people think that he's the dude who is spending time with the briefing books. Literally no one asked of that, asked of that, asked him for that. And because no one asked him for that, he isn't going to be rewarded for it on another level to aesthetically. And this is where I think the age part plays in because he is just not even capable of conveying. I don't doubt that for a politician, Biden is incredibly informed on a topic like that, especially after how focused he is. But I doubt his ability to competently communicate that to voters. So there is a solution here. I think this is also where his focus on FDR is like a strength and a weakness. The solution is to take the FDR plan and just make clear to people that, hey, like, I'm old, I might not be there with it all the way entirely, but I've got the team of teams that people are really putting it forward. Like I don't understand why Biden didn't just say, hey guys, look, here's the deal. I spent all of my time mastering this topic. And I've used that knowledge to appoint the czar of all czars who's going to crush his view for me on the issue. Same thing could be done with the supply chain problems, same things that could be done with inflation. There's a way that he could have articulated his strengths. I am going to empower the people to crush these problems. They would still be rewarded because people are saying, oh, of course, we're not expecting Joe Biden to hop on the flight to Wisconsin. But we know and trust that Biden hired the right person for the job, which once again is the FDR model. I have an episode of Arsenal of Democracy coming out this week where there is this really helpful conversation

with a Hudson fellow named Nadia Shadlow. And she was just talking about how a huge problem modern government, and this actually goes to a problem the Biden administration is facing right now, is that everyone is just obsessed with saying like, hey, we passed this big bill and this spending was included in the bill. And she's like, in DC today, we insist on treating that as if that's the win, which that then in terms of that quotation helped me better understand the failure of the Biden presidency. Because at the end of the day, I think people just understand that even if you pass a semiconductor focused CHIPS Act, or even if you passed the IRA and you're doing all this investment in climate, they are only going to judge you and give you plots for that once there's an actual effect on the ground. Nadia's point, and listeners can check out this episode on Wednesday, is that we shouldn't be judging the CHIPS Act, which she supports by the number of dollars that were put out by Congress last year, we should be dodging it by, okay, hey, on what time are we going to enhance our semiconductor independence when it comes to China? That's her point, just focus on that. And on that point, you know, if I'm on the team Biden right now, I could tell you, I could tell you that we passed all these bills and all this money, but I don't think they would have any ability to actually point to accomplishments or their equivalent of the Hoover Dam or the Civilian Conservation Corps, those different issues. So that really gets at, I think, the lack of the lack of efficacy there. Yeah, I mean, I just think he's kind of a narcissist. I think that he really wants all the personal credit. And look, they all are, to be clear, all presidents are like this. The best ones, I guess, are just able to balance it. He doesn't have the balance, and this is where his age comes in. Yeah, it's one of the, you know, and I think about this too, there's a real fundamental narcissism of that, like I put in all this work, why am I not getting the, why am I not getting the appreciation? I mean, I, listen, I fell victim to this too, and I get it. I work a lot behind the scenes to like create stuff and people show zero appreciation for the product, but hey, guess what? Like that's how it goes. That showbiz, baby. Yeah, exactly. It's like, that's, that's, that, it is what it is. And it's one of those where do a better job then, do a better job of expressing it to people because they are not mind readers. It's not your job, you know, it's not their job to be like, you know what, I got to sit back and think about all these things Biden did for me. It's just what, I mean, that's, it's democracy. You work for people for a reason. It's very frustrating to work in a semi-public facing job, even at a very small micro level like I do, but hey, guess what? Like that's your chosen line of work. You're welcome to go work for somebody else if you want to. I had a lot of politicians who like this, who actually drives you really, really, really bothers me that they're unable to see that. Yeah, I think the last thing I'll add is, and I was kind of thinking about this, I think, and I think he, by he, I mean, Franklin Ford did a good job of conveying this. This is a very direct tie on certain big issues that we focus a lot of our work on between the Trump and the Biden administrations. And I think that if polls continue where they're going, and let's just imagine where Biden isn't reelected, it'd be fair to say that Trump's first term and Biden's first term both failed in the easiest way we could evaluate the success of a first term, which is, did you get reelected or not? It seems to me that the Trump administration's fundamental issue is that it crushed the vibes, like look at those polls that say that these are current modern day polls that say that Trump accomplished more than Joe Biden did. That's just like ridiculous. They got to appear like metrics. If you just look at the actual metrics, that's just not true. But, and this is to your point about, I'm not just going to whine and say, like, why won't the voters recognize how much has been accomplished? Like

accomplishment is also like a vibe. There's an energy. There's a schwa de vie. If there's a lawn, there's all these different features. And that is what the Biden administration is in front of doing incapable of actually translating. And at a key level, vibes only take you so far. Then there's a pandemic and an election and everything falls apart. So the Trump administration was strong on vibes, weak on policy. It seems to me the Biden administration is strong on policy, irredeemably weak on vibes and ability to convey a successful administration that's accomplishing things. I had a, and people push back when we talk about vibes. Some people like vibes. Other people don't like, don't like vibes. So I'll try to make vibes a little more tangible for people. The biggest advantage Trump had going into 2015, 2016 was that he articulated that there was a general feeling of decline in the country. And his recognition of that was something a lot of voters gave him credit for. And if Joe Biden had one overarching political goal, it would have been to say, Hey, the way that we arrest national decline isn't Trump running in bowl in a china shop. It's me and my experts and our center left democratic party seriouses, but we are going to arrest that feeling of natural national decline. I don't think the Biden administration policy wins aside in terms of passing those spending bills has at all impacted that even when you have the factories coming back, even if you have the alliances performing in Asia, they just been unable to translate those political and policy accomplishments into a country's understanding of itself, something that someone like Reagan was incredibly effective at. First look, he's talking about this. She's like, look, you know, she's like, Biden, he's done some good stuff. She's like, that I really support that will impact the country on a long term. She's like, but on a short term, it's like, what have you done for me lately? And look, I mean, even the Trump, Trump was able to connect his rhetoric to one of the most favorable economic conditions that he had no idea. If anything, the most vindicated thing of Trump was consistently hammering the Federal Reserve not to raise interest rates. Turns out he was right. He was actually 100% right in terms of his own personal, personal political ambitions. And look, I think Biden, the inability to make people, I mean, I talk about it forever, I've said it around the show, freedom from fear. Guys, the Great Depression got way worse for the first six years of the FDR presidency. Nobody ever remembers that. It was so much worse under FDR. And he still got, not only reelected, he got like 70, 80% approval ratings because people felt like he really was fighting for it. And that's all, that's all people care about. It's not even about the long term stuff. It's like, on a day-to-day basis, is the president in the trenches. The CCC, the Civil and Conservation Corps, didn't really work, also got struck down. Or maybe I'm confusing it with WN. One of them got struck down. I forget. Lots of three-letter programs got struck down as unconstitutional. Yeah. There was a lot of crazy shit, which was actually wrong, didn't really work at all. It was like all kinds of stuff with agriculture. Didn't matter. Farmers were like, hey, he actually thinks about me. He's caring. Many of it actually backfired. Same thing. Doesn't matter. It's not just the policy. It's like the daily feeling of action. He's failed on that dramatically. And then the main one is, and this is, I'll talk about my show probably more than anything recently, structural. The structural conditions have never been worse for most people on a day-to-day basis. For the very, very basics of life, food, housing, shelter, it's a disaster, I think right now in terms of that entree place. And if I was in politics, that's all I would be doing all day long if you actually wanted to fix it. But that's a very,

very difficult thing. We don't have a really consensus around those issues. Some of them aren't even really federal. Some of them are local and state. It's complicated. And so you just default to what you know, which is either old-style politics or culture and primary-based politics. And that's where we are. We are. And once again, what Biden knows, and this is the part which I think that Franklin conveys properly, is Biden knows big spending bills and working with Congress effectively. Biden has been a much more effective president when it comes to working with Congress than President Obama was. Nobody cares. And that's the key thing. And actually, Sagar, to your point when you're saying some of these aren't even federal issues, it's just like if there's a general feeling of decline, it's related to the cost of education and local inflation and housing, et cetera, especially because the IRA and the CHIPS Act are like long-term bills, that just is not going to translate into ameliorating those issues. And I think this is just also where he just suffers from the lack of ability to just find the right team of people that people would have confidence in. So that's why I think the theory of the case is really key here. So one other thing I want to get into, because a bunch of people wrote in asking for our thoughts about this, especially given there's a lot of focus on this topic within the Biden administration when it comes to the Afghanistan withdrawal. People want to know, two years out, James Hassan, Jerry Dunleavy had their book, Franklin, Rick reports on this, they want to hear your take. I want to give my take on this one real quick first. My take would basically be, and this is why I think if there's a section that listeners would probably enjoy the most in the Franklin Four book, it's going to be like the deep reporting on what went down in Afghanistan. My takeaway is, and this is your point, Sager, Joe Biden is incredibly stubborn. And sometimes that stubbornness is a real advantage, which is he's the first president since the war in Afghanistan started, who was just sort of like generals. I don't care what you say. I don't believe you. I don't believe it's going to be turned around around the corner. We are withdrawing no ifs ands or buts here. And look, if you're a person who thinks we need to withdraw from Afghanistan, that by definition is a good thing. Trump couldn't do it. Obama couldn't do it. Never. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Here's the problem of the stubbornness since it comes out in the reporting. He's so stubborn that I don't think he followed up and did the work. I think at their best, James, Jerry, and Franklin just pointed out there are just some very basic things that they just didn't take care of, didn't focus on that led to a lot of the disaster parts. I think there are some very straightforward, you had months to plan this, there were basic tactical and strategic decisions that were done properly. They weren't paying attention to the actual speed at which the country was falling. They weren't paying attention enough to, for example, and this was in the reporting. I didn't know this. I didn't realize that the, and this is the political disaster. Remember when the plane took off and all the people were on the plane? I mean, that literally happened because the pilot panicked and just took off. So if you're talking about planning and strategy, it's sort of like, hey guys, what do we do? This is a basic question. What do we do if people start rushing in the airfield? There are just basic things. I just don't think we're asked. I think that's where the disinterest came from. He's just very... I have a real issue with Jerry Dunleavy and James Hassan's book. Look, I like Jerry. I think he's a nice guy. I don't know James at all. I know his brother. I think the entire premise of the book... Who's his brother? Peter. I worked with him for years over at The Daily Caller. Peter's a good guy. Again, I don't know James. I know he's serving

in the military, so respect. That said, I think the premise of the book is bullshit. And I also think the premise of Jerry's entire posture on this, which I've argued with him privately on this, is also bullshit. I redirect actually an entire premise, Marshall. This is entirely military. They do the same thing that they did in Iraq. They didn't want to plan for it. They want to foresee administration's hand. They're going to say, it's too much of a shit show. We can't do it. We got to stay. This is why you have to do it. That's exactly what they did in 2008, ahead of the status of forces agreement. By the way, not a lot of people focus on this. Then you were referring to Iraq with status forces agreement. We left behind actually more military equipment in Iraq in 08 than we did in Afghanistan. They did the exact same thing because they just assumed that they were like, nah, the Obama administration, they're not really going to do it. There's no way we're actually going to get out of Iraq. And Obama was like, no, we're actually getting out of Iraq. And so it was a total disaster. So I think this was sabotage from the top down. I think General Milley and all the Joint Chiefs, all of every single one of them should have lost their job as a result of this. Commander-in-Chief gave them an order. They didn't follow the order properly. Also this entire idea around Bob Grom and all this being entirely a political decision. Once again, these were made at the actual command level. It wasn't just that they were like flagging it up to the White House and the White House was ordering them specifically not to do this. They're the ones who received an order, not only from Biden. The President of the United States, Donald Trump signed a deal with the Taliban. We were getting out on May, what was it? May 5 or something like that? May 1 of 2021. Boom. No discussion. And then they just, again, they assumed it wasn't going to happen. They got their temporary thing. They thought it was fake. And also massive indictment of ISR. Country we've been in for 20 fucking years. And you don't know that the Taliban is about to take a district. I gave the Bidens, I mean, I am basically not willing to. I think the only thing I will ever criticize about the Biden withdrawal from Afghanistan was the worst press conference, probably of his entire presidency. This is also when we really lost the country. Do you remember this when you leaned on the podium and he got, it was horrible. It's horrible. Anyway, yeah, the pilot, what the fuck is, what's the White House supposed to do about the pilot? Some shithead 25 year old who takes off too quickly. You can't do anything about that. Nothing. Like, yeah, it's his fault. I think he should have lost a job. I doubt he did. I doubt anybody who was in command on that. In fact, I know they didn't. You know, General Milly is still strutting around. So look, fuck them. I feel very passionately about this. I think they sabotaged it from the day one. And I think they got what they wanted. I think they, I think they, at the end of the day, they won. I also, you know, this is a funny one, two years out, two years out, how do these people, how are they going to choose their beloved Afghan girls or Ukraine? How do you think that Ukraine is going to go when you were tying \$300 million of fucking a year down in Afghanistan? Also, not a single one of their predictions ever came true. Not one American citizen was ever killed in Afghanistan, not one American citizen supposedly left behind was ever killed in Afghanistan, a Taliban every single, let every single one go. There was no mass slaughter of Afghan interpreters. The Taliban are fucking stupid. Okay. They know exactly what they're doing. The, the entire idea was that we were going to have some mass terrorists based in Afghanistan. Nope. Actually, it turns out,

even though we were out of the country, we're still able to kill Al-Zawari. I mean, it's just every single critique is bullshit. So look, yeah, like I said, I feel very passionately. I'm the biggest Biden stand there is on the withdrawal from Afghanistan. I think it's the best thing you did in his presidency. I think you can, if anyone ever questions your, your ideological heterodoxy and your fairness, I think you could dine out on that anecdote for the next 10 years. Okay. And I think what the two things, one, I get your point around the military. I just am always going to be very, I wish, given everything you just said, then Biden extended his skepticism of the military and the generals through the withdrawal. Because I think once again, you see this in the reporting by, you know, for, I think he literally just checked out of the issue. Maybe then there were a bunch of things going on, but I'm always just going to like, okay, but that's Jake Sherman's fault. And then Jake Sherman should have been fired. Like listen, I agree. Jake, Jake, Jake Sullivan. Jake Sullivan, sorry. Yeah. Jake Sullivan. Jake Sullivan should have been fired 100%. Look, I believe in accountability. I think every single person involved in that should have been fired, but for very different reasons than people are saying, and you know, this is the thing I've been going back and forth with Jerry, and they never have any fucking answer for this. Now what? Okay. They're like, oh, the Taliban took control of the thing we withdrew to the airfield. What you're saying is that the United States military should have occupied the city of Kabul. Do you know, and everybody bitches and moans that 13 people were killed. I think it's horrible that these people were killed. What do you think is going to happen? How many people are going to get killed if you occupy, occupy the city of Kabul? We're going to be a direct shooting war with the Taliban. You think it was easy for ISIS to walk into a fucking airport? Can you imagine what it would have been like doing checkpoints? It would have been Iraq, suicide bomb level shit all over again. We would have lost hundreds of troops, hundreds. And we know this from the time that we occupied the country of Afghanistan. So it's just, it's so dishonest. It is so unbelievably dishonest. I'll drop a nuclear hot take too. Listen, I have been so angry lately, watching some of the families of the people who were either wounded in this attack or not, who have been turning this into some sort of partisan football when it's like, how many more of your sons would have been killed in the alternate? Nobody ever asked that question. Like nobody ever actually thinks about it. And so, man, it makes me really, really upset. And listen, if you lost your son, you freeze, you know, God bless you, you're allowed to do whatever you want. But I think that weaponizing people's kids, you know, dead kids for political purposes is fucking disgusting. And I'm watching it happen all the time on Fox News. And you know, what's, again, what's the alternative? What were we supposed to do? It would have been 10, 50 times worse. But whatever, you know, nobody ever, no one's ever gonna hear this. I know that. No, I think, I think especially the part where I agree with you is the underlying bad faith of a Mormon decent person. And actually, once again, I like Jerry, I like James, we had a good conversation. I think in my format, they were pretty fair. But very clearly, the GOP foreign policy crew is using the withdrawal as like the ultimate like peacemaking issue in the sense that like, if you're an isolationist, if you're a realist, if you're a neocon, if you're a hawk, it's just an issue where you have something you can attack the Biden administration on. That's it. It's like, oh, it's like the weakness. I think it's just used very aggressively in that fashion. And I think to your point, the lack of engagement with the

alternatives are a key. And I think also, and this is actually very helpful to think of from your perspective, the key thing Jerry and James, where we say that at the top of their episode, is that they think that you have to divorce the judgment to leave the country from the tactical withdrawal. And the key thing to your point, though, is you have to weigh what happened against the alternative. So you just say, if you just take that off the ground, that that kind of defeats the entire purpose of the analysis. Yeah, if we stayed, now what? You know, it's like, now what? They never answer that. Well, then we're at war with the Taliban. Okay, we're going to get suicide bombed, SVS, SBB IDs, every single day. And now, you know, you guys got guys coming back with no legs for what reason? Like, answer that question. And then, and then the bigger medic question was that we funded to the tune of over \$100 billion, the most pathetic fighting force the world has ever seen, the Afghan National Security Forces. How come there's no scandal about it? It's like, I am shocked that it's like the withdrawal itself became the flashpoint. And it's like Saigon in 75. You know, what's the scandal? Is it Saigon? Or is it the fucking entire experience of MacVe command or whatever? I blame MacVe command. Easy. I think history will

indicate the decision. No questions asked. Yeah. And considering how many questions I got from folks about that episode, like legitimately, some of the most engagement I've gotten in a while, I will be sure to follow up with a, let's just say a less politically driven guest.

James and Jerry, they wanted to stay. Fuck and say it then. Defend the decision. That's my thing. Defend the decision. Everybody can do nitty gritty. Give me the plan.

Thousand troops in Afghanistan. What purpose? Why? How long? Why is it worth it to be in an active war with the Taliban? They'll never, they'll never be able to answer that question.

There we go. So now we're going to get into some Q&A. If you'd like to hear this portion of the episode, go to [realignment.supercast.com](https://realignment.supercast.com) and click the link at the top of the show notes.

Five a month, 50 a year, 500 for a lifetime membership. All right. And now for my interview about the new book, *Optimal Illusions, the False Promise of Optimization*.

Coco Kourmi, welcome to the realignment. Hi, Marshall. Thanks for having me.

Really excited to speak with you. So we're talking today about the false promise of optimization.

There's a couple of different levels that we can have that conversation around. There's the personal versus societal. I guess I'll start with the personal. I own an Apple watch. I have a loop.

I took those off to do this recording. I'm wearing an analog watch. What are your thoughts on the idea of optimizing ourselves via technology, digital tools, tech, et cetera?

Well, I hope you didn't take those off on my account. I have my personal preferences. I'm often accused of being a Luddite, which I think is an unfair characterization because I certainly don't impose my preferences or my way of doing things on others, which my sense of the Luddites, the original Luddites, is that they had sort of an activist bent in addition to an aesthetic one.

I don't have an Apple watch. I do have an Apple phone. I am in favor of being contemplative about the technologies and the optimizations we choose to let into our lives.

You know, it's funny when you describe yourself as not a Luddite because you're not an activist.

I had an image of you and a cohort of people just trying to smash Apple stores or other kind of tech forward places like Teslas or anything as if you were attacking the looms

or the old Industrial Revolution things, if it's the 1790s. But I guess the real question here then is we're talking about the personal aspect of optimization, but the book is actually,

aside from the obvious type of optimal illusions, describing the false promise of optimization, especially on a societal level. The idea is that there's a false promise, and that's kind of like the word that we're living in today where we're kind of reckoning with the successes and failures of a society centered on optimization. Looking back though, what would your articulation of like the best case scenario, the most optimistic vision, what could optimization have offered us from a societal perspective?

My view is actually quite sanguine of optimization. It's positive, right? I think optimization has offered us already a huge amount of benefit, societally. We have medicines that we wouldn't have had without the technologies and ideas about optimization. We have lifespans and health around the world that again wouldn't have existed without some of these innovations. We have supply chains that get us all manner of delicacies from literally all corners of the world within days and sometimes hours. We can experience cultures that we would have had no idea that even

existed a few hundred years ago. Obviously, the list goes on and on. Buildings, building safety, industrial safety, transportation, even efficiencies in our use of natural resources.

My point in the book or where I am more pessimistic or rather express a sadness is that I think we failed to acknowledge the costs or what we've lost with some of these innovations. What's something we've lost?

Well, I place things into three conceptual categories. Obviously, there are many examples within those categories. The high-level categories I call slack, place and scale. Slack is this idea of downtime or white space. There's this quote I like from Miles Davis, the musician, that music is the space between the notes. We obviously, in biological organisms, rest and rejuvenation play important roles in growth. As we've optimized everything from our supply chains to our markets, we've introduced a number of important and often frightening fragilities. That's one thing we've lost. Another category I call place really refers to the particulars and the diversity that you often see the redundancies in less optimized systems. When you engineer things to go faster and move more efficiently, that often involves atomizing things into units and making things all the same. Because when things are all the same, you can line them up and reorganize them into new, faster, better configurations. With that, we often lose the particulars that make a system less amenable to optimization, but more interesting, more complex, more resilient. The third thing is scale, or really a sense of integrity between parts and whole. The more we introduce methods of transportation, for example, that boggle the mind, the fact that I can be on a different continent in less than a day, in a different place that speaks a different language with people in places and experiences I don't recognize. That's fantastic, but it's also disconnected us from the first principle's understanding of, oh, actually, like, travel takes a long time. Cultures are different. The same thing has happened with the algorithms that are increasingly encroaching on our digital lives. When you think about the first algorithms that existed, they were formulaic, simple, deterministic, and almost anybody could understand how they worked. Now we have news recommendations. We have digital devices that very few people in the world understand in their entirety how these things work. With that has come a loss or a disconnect and a moving away from human scale understanding. I want to read a quote from a book that really, I think, differentiates your approach to this topic

from, I think, some of the more traditional ones I think someone would expect. The quote is, this is on page eight, depending on whom you ask, we're living in an age of anxiety, an era of narcissism, the fourth turning, or the decline of empire. It's the end of the neoliberal order of growth, the beginning of authoritarianism, prelude to dark days, or climate catastrophe. Doomsday feeling is rising. That quote stuck out to me because AI recently had how one of the coiners of the term and concept of the fourth turning, and of course this podcast, does a lot of work on the liberalism space. How would you describe the age we're living in? Secondly, what does the general anxiety of decline, the feelings you speak to in that quote, have to do with this broader discussion about optimization and its false promise?

How would I describe the age we're living in? I think it's all of the above. Obviously, those sound bites are taken from various parts of the cultural political spectrum, and different groups or different political perspectives would describe it differently. What I feel around me is just a profound sense of malaise and this attempt to reconcile how fast time seems to be moving in certain ways, and how much opportunity and freedoms we feel that we have on one hand, with how stuck and uncertain we also feel on the other.

I've noticed this in particular, and it's in part what motivated writing the book, in experiencing the move from one of the centers of optimization in San Francisco's Silicon Valley, which is where I grew up and where I spent a good chunk of my adult life, to a rural place that moves at a different pace and operates according to different codes. Yeah, and the second question which you answered is why does that depressing opening fit into a book about optimization?

I apologize if it was overly depressing. I'm, again, fairly optimistic about the future and our human ability to invent and create whatever comes next. The reason it relates to optimization is because in the book I tell the story of the intellectual history of how this mindset of optimization was fomented in America primarily, but in a lot of Western thought over the last few hundred years, and how it's come to dominate our current way of seeing, not just of doing things in the engineered world, but also our philosophical world. One of the arguments I make is that optimization is this cannibalizing epistemology in that the more we fall prey to this way of seeing, the more it crowds out other ways of seeing. I think that's one of the reasons that that we feel stuck is that we've made things faster, better, cheaper, and as a result have become so laser focused on optimizing that when optimization starts to fail us or we start to see its shortcomings, we can't think of anything else or any other way to do things.

That's so interesting. I guess my next question would be what is uniquely American about optimization because I'm trying to do a totally, totally uninformed historical comparison. I'm sure I can find an ancient Egyptian who's chiseling a pyramid would want to hammer that last 15 more chisels than it did before throughout the go down and get a new one. What's uniquely, let's say post 19th century about optimization as you're critiquing or at least trying to articulate? This is a somewhat impressionistic argument because I'm not a historian of early America, but I am a reader of a lot of early American literature and also modern American literature. I love a lot of American writers from across the centuries, and I think literature is a super important perspective or lens on how we're feeling about the world. If you look at both early accounts, not necessarily literary, but also just accounts of some of the first European settlers here and also accounts of Europeans who were

coming over to America later and trying to figure out what was so peculiar about this place. One of the mythic threads that underlies our history or our founding as a country is this idea that we have this blank slate continent to conquer and invent upon. Now, obviously from other perspectives, the perspective of people who were here before European settlers, they didn't see it that way. I think a lot of the settlers didn't necessarily see it that way, but it is certainly this mythic thread that underlies a lot of our stories, our films, so on and so forth. That relates to optimization if you look at how it works in a mathematical, technical way. It's all about bounding a certain system and trying to create the best or extract the most from it. I think that can do, manifest, destiny, feeling of early America and even modern-day America relates pretty closely to that idea and that technology. I trace a number of philosophical movements and also modern-day lifestyle movement like Marie Kondo's minimalism that tie back into that thread. This is also a question where there's no proper answer, but I'm just curious if we're looking at American society circa 2023, audience members will have various images and understandings of how optimization rules their lives and work views, but is there a period either during your lifetime or that you've read about and have engaged with where you feel as if the balance between optimization and its alternatives were probably right where they needed to be? That's an interesting question. I shy away from being overly prescriptive in the book and perhaps in my life as well. One of the points I make in thinking through what comes next are alternatives to this monomaniacal focus on optimization. I look at two alternatives. One is optimizing or de-optimizing optimally, which tends to be this ethos out of Silicon Valley, which is one of the centers of optimization, that if an optimization isn't working, we'll figure out how to de-optimize it optimally, and that can be helpful. It can also be problematic. Another response I look at is there are arguments from different camps that we have all these optimization. We've gone too far. The television was okay, but streaming TV is not, or flip phones are great, but not smartphones. You can make examples from all domains. I like a quote from the technologist Kevin Kelly, who says that technology is everything that was invented after we were 10 years old. This other response says, well, we should just unwind to a particular point in history, a particular golden age where everything was great, and we had this perfect balance between just the right amount of technology. First of all, I don't think that's possible. We can't go back in time. It's very hard to regulate once the cat's out of the bag, once Pandora's box is open. It's very difficult to get it back in. I think the other problem with that response is that we often romanticize these golden eras. The pre-industrial world might have been less polluted. Fewer people might have been dying or being severely injured in factories and so on and so forth, but there are a lot of people dying of diseases that they don't die of today because we have much cleaner water as just one example, drinking water in most parts of the world. How's that for a non-dancer? No, and it's fair because I think the reason why I said it was an unfair question from the start is if you've read your book or listened to what you've said so far on the podcast by definition, it's not a surprise that you would reject the idea of that golden age. I do think you brought up something interesting, and this goes to trying to help the audience grasp what we're discussing here. You were discussing the differences between the flip phone and the smartphone,

the normal television set with cable from streaming, but I think even in that example, you are basically tying in the audience's mind a link between quote-unquote technological progress and optimization, and I'm not quite sure they're the same thing in the sense that I'm not sure that a smartphone equals an optimized flip phone, but I'd love you to explain more about that.

Yeah, that's a great point. An important thing to note about optimization as a technology, as a mathematical idea, is that at its core, it's defined by an objective function or what you're optimizing for. If you're optimizing for being able to talk to somebody when you're standing outside of you, when you're not connected to a landline, but not being distracted by any manner of games and distractions on the internet, a flip phone might be more optimal if you're optimizing for being able to do your work and answer emails and search Google and be on Instagram and all these other things, smartphone is more optimized for that. I agree there's not technological or historical, the arrow of time doesn't necessarily correspond to a more or less optimized state.

It's just interesting because it wasn't even me disagreeing with you. I think it just gets at the difficulty of understanding what these terms mean and how we should actually think through them. I think it's much easier to understand that efficiency can go too far. I think it's much harder to argue with people against something that we conceive of as technological progress, because even if we can argue that smartphone culture has gone too far in a different bunch of directions, I think it's a losing argument to basically offer up the regressing to a dumb phone as a scalable alternative. Something I really like to ask you about because I'm kind of thinking about this on a baseline level. Out of all my guests, you are almost certainly one who I have the least in common with in the sense that you come from the world of mathematics and I come from the world of decently light social science. I just love for you to articulate how your background in mathematics and the focus on empirical values and numbers has helped shape the way you think about this topic. We might have more in common than you think.

I am a writer and artist, probably masquerading as a mathematician. I happen to be good at numbers

and figures, but I think my brain doesn't work in a particularly linear fashion, which a lot of mathematics and applied mathematics isn't particularly or it involves logic, but it's maybe not as cut and dried as like accounting, for example. Often people ask me what I do and I tell them and then they think I must be really good at spreadsheets and accounting, which I'm not, because I'm not, like I said, particularly linear or detail-oriented. Also, I am very curious about the social world. Your question was how my grounding in numbers and figures has influenced my world view or my approach. I think I've worked with these with numbers, with mathematical models. I have obviously first an expertise in the topic. I know how in general algorithms work and I think that allows me to see them maybe with less of this fear that I think when people hear AI or algorithms in the modern 2020s context, it's often tinged with this ominous feeling. I think I've also come from the perspective that mathematical models are their abstractions, their frames, their ways of looking at the world. And I think a lot of you might be familiar with this from the social sciences too. There are social and cultural theories. There are economic theories that frame and inform how we understand the material world around us or the social world around us. And that's the perspective that I bring to this cultural idea of optimization. It's a mathematical

technique, a way of modeling particular things in the world, but it's also a way of seeing the world. When we see the world as something that can be optimized, that can be sped up, that can be made better and improved, that informs how we behave in the world. And I think that's something, going back to your earlier, your great question about why is it uniquely American? I think that's another way in which optimization is uniquely American or peculiarly American. We often bring this solutionist engineer's mentality to many of our, obviously, our engineering problems, but also our cultural and social questions. Yeah, I think that's really helpful. I think another question I'd have is, as I'm thinking through the parts of the book that really resonated with me, it's the focus on optimization's limitation on resilient. And as I'm thinking about the supply chain issues, as I'm thinking about a lot of the post-2020 challenges we face as a country, my end state would really be like, I want to have a society that's more resilient, even at the cost of peak efficiency. What does a resilient society look like to you? Yeah, I mean, there are so many ways to answer that question. I would turn that back on you as well. I'll give a quick answer first. I'll give a tangible answer from the perspective of living in a small community, where a small and, I think, very healthy community in which if a need arises, if somebody is suffering, if somebody needs housing, if somebody is ill, that need, if somebody is without food, that need is often met organically from within the community. And there aren't very many institutions or formal institutions or structures, even economic structures to make that happen. A lot of things here, which I find so fascinating, happen informally through barter, through just exchanges. Obviously, the kinds of things that happen in small healthy communities aren't scalable. They wouldn't work in big cities for a lot of reasons. But I think that's one element of it that I'll just put out there to begin of resilience, which is to put it sort of casually, people have each other's backs and on all kinds of levels. And that resilience is organic. It's not top down. How would you define it? Yeah, thanks for throwing the question back at me because I kind of cheat here and ask big questions, I guess. I just sit back and I'll do that on my own. So it's an important muscle to work out every once in a while. No, I think that especially because I come from the policy world, mine is just very, very tangible. So it's the recognition that efficiency has costs, which I don't think, which I think if you pushed a lot of engineers or people who played a role in constructing the systems that really got stressed at the start of this decade, they would say, yeah, we always knew that. We always knew there was a cost to just-in-time delivery to placing, let's say, all of our semi-conductor chip capacity in a country that's in the middle of the biggest geopolitical crisis of the 2020s. They would basically acknowledge that reality, but I don't think that that knowledge extended beyond the tactical level and didn't just zoom out and just be something that we get into it, obviously. So that's just like the first step. Efficiency has cost. I think the other step would be a resilient society would be one where we give up some immediate upside in order to prevent maximum downside. So maybe the cost of my Yeti mic that I'm recording this podcast on is a little higher because it's not quite made in the most perfectly efficient factory in the most optimized for globalization location, but it is okay because unlike at the start of COVID, if there's a massive geopolitical crisis that further limits supply chains, it won't take me four months to get a new one because the entire supply chain shuts down. So I think that's the way I put it. You give up

some upside to prevent a lot and a lot and a lot of downside during a period where there's crew going to be a lot of that. Yeah, absolutely. And I think one of the interesting things right now, and this is going back to this thought or soundbite I put out there earlier about Silicon Valley often looking for ways to deoptimize optimally. Those questions, I think engineers do think about those questions because engineers think in terms of trade-offs, and I agree there's a lot of short-sightedness or there has been short-sightedness in terms of picking off the low-hanging fruit like we can make these cheap devices overseas. Who needs to look into where they're being made or how they're being made because consumers are buying them and they're getting cheaper every year. But I don't think that engineers don't think about trade-offs entirely, including trade-offs between the present and the future. I think the devil's in the details and this is where it gets really tricky. I have spent a lot of time with farmers in the Midwest and doing work. It started out with sort of mathematical modeling type work and then I became interested in industrial agriculture in the US as a system and as a remarkable industry but one that's fraught with fragilities. This question of how do you scale things back to the point of that trade-off that you're talking about between efficiency and redundancy is met. I think number one is a very difficult question to answer and I'm not even sure it can be answered with this engineer's mindset of we're going to de-optimize optimally. Something I'm really curious about as we're nearing the end of our conversation is so much of the way you write in the book and the way you think about this issue is really defined by your interactions with Silicon Valley. A lot of your time in Silicon Valley is especially focused on the 2010s, which on 15 different levels we've moved on from. You don't have the same tech bull market, IPOs aren't happening, you don't quite have the same SPF or Elizabeth Holmes or Adam Newman energy that's kind of coming there. It really feels like at least for a while the gold rush has slowed a bit. I'd love for you just to kind of articulate the differences between the Silicon Valley you see today and just like the past one that I think shapes a lot of the world that you're responding to in the book. Yeah, that's a great question and a difficult one because I haven't been in tech physically or geographically even though I've still kept some toes in that world in terms of my work. But I think, yeah, there are a couple shifts. I'm not sure I could identify 15, but the big ones to me are this energy of growth that you identify in the SPFs and the Elizabeth Holmes and the IPOs. There's the energy of growth and then there's also the deification of this world. And I think both of those started to decline maybe in the late 2010s, maybe 2018 or so when suddenly people started asking questions about giving their personal data to these giant tech companies when people started asking questions about the business practices of some of these too good to be true kind of founders. And now my sense is that these companies still exist, but they've become kind of commoditized, they're more like utilities. They're still drawing a lot of talent, but maybe not, I think there's a micro bubble right now with AI and talent going there and a bubble in belief there, but it's certainly not as big as what we saw in the late 2000s and throughout the 2010s. So I think it's a long way of saying I think the industry has become kind of boring and also more universally despised or looked down upon even as we continue to use all these products. I think the closing question and this is just kind of interesting because obviously you moving to a rural part of the country plays a big role in this story and this journey. I'm just kind of fascinated by the idea that you kind of said that I got alive and really

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been in Silicon Valley, I'm looking on the outside, but it feels like so much of the story of the past 20 years or so is everything in many ways becoming like Silicon Valley, tech swallowing everything, soft breeding the world to give the Mark Andreessen shout out. It seems like part of the another way of articulating your point that tech has become boring is that everything has just become tech and when everything is just this thing, it's obviously there. If everyone's kind of walking around in all birds in certain parts of the country, obviously this isn't everywhere because there's been a tech de-formalization of the workplace. It's hard for me to imagine a war where you're just totally separated from. So just close with your articulation of your ability to just be on the outside and escape something that feels really totalizing.

Yeah, well, that is one of the places I land in the book is that there's no opting out of optimization. We're all part of this world for better or for worse. I will say though that I think optimization in Silicon Valley, the tech world, it's infused our culture in these subtle and in some ways quite dangerous ways, this way of seeing things.

But in terms of the actual technologies, I'm always amazed at the disconnect when I talk to friends who are in San Francisco or New York or still very much in the trenches in this world. And all the front and center are these debates about AI and chat GPT and so on and so forth.

And then I go to a party here or in a population of a few thousand, I could probably find if I tried really hard, like maybe 10 people who had even heard of chat GPT. So I think Silicon Valley does overestimate its reach in terms or I guess its own importance. It overestimates its own importance, which is not to say that some of these underlying philosophies aren't still, you know, I think they are definitely in the water in many places beyond Silicon Valley.

That is an excellent place to end. The book is optimal illusions, the false promise of optimization. Thank you for joining me on the realignment.

Thank you so much, Marshall. Really enjoyed it.

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