

[Transcript] The Realignment / 417 | Seth D. Kaplan: Repairing American Society, One Zip Code at a Time

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Realignment.

The Realignment spends a lot of time focused on the big picture.

The more, however, you look at the specific challenges facing the country, violence, family disintegration, addiction, alienation, and despair, it becomes clear that we need to zoom in as close as possible on these phenomenon, moving beyond comfortable, tidy narratives. In this case, the author Seth D Kaplan has a new book out focused on why neighborhoods in America are specifically in trouble. Whether they're rich or poor, rural or urban, his new book is *Fragile Neighborhoods, Repairing American Society, One Zip Code at a Time*. I really enjoy this conversation and really recommend his book as well too. Because Seth is by background focused on the foreign policy space, I'm always interested in when folks who come from that background move back from the international sphere and focus in on the country back at home. For we dive into our conversation though, a reminder that Saga and I are now publishing bi-weekly recap Supercast AMA episodes. You can listen to last Sunday's episode focused on Israel, Hamas, and Gaza and go to realignment.supercast.com to hear the full version. Keep the questions coming, you could either subscribe to the Supercast to get the full version and leave your questions there, or you can email us at realignmentpod.com. Hope you all enjoy the conversation. Seth Kaplan, welcome to the realignment.

Thrilled to be here. Thank you for having me, Marshall.

Yeah, I'm glad to chat with you. You're actually the perfect guest for me because listeners know most of my day-to-day work is focused on the foreign policy space. I work at the Hudson Institute, I'm at the Clement Center, I'm at UT focused on national security issues. Your day job focuses on foreign policy. You've done a lot of work focused on Libya, Nigeria, Ukraine, but obviously with this book, *Fragile Neighborhoods*, and this podcast for me, we both have a deep interest in what's actually going on in this country. So here's just a great way of introducing you. What has your work in Libya, Nigeria, Ukraine, etc. How has that informed the way you assess the stability and fragility of American society today?

First, let me say that I got into the work I do on *Fragile States* because I basically traveled a lot, I studied a lot of countries, and the question that kept me up at night for years, even when I was in business, I was in business for several years in different parts of the world, the question that kept me up at night was, why do some societies do better than others?

Imagine I lived in Nigeria, and then I lived in Japan. Those are two large countries, one very not cohesive, and one very cohesive, and so clearly I and I've been in 75 or so countries, worked in 30, 40 countries. So I had this question, and then I wrote a book on *Fragile States*, and then I created a career, and the lesson that I learned from all of that was that relationships, the nature of relationships in society, relationships between people, relationships between groups, relationships between different parts of society, that's the central lens, the central way to understand what is going on in a country and the future of the country.

And so my work, what makes me unique in my work on *Fragile States*, or you could think of them as *Fragile Societies*, is that most people think of these, of their problems in a technical, government-centric manner, and I think of the problems as about relationships between parts of society between groups in a more horizontal than vertical manner. And so when people started asking me 2015, 2016, 2017, I walk around Washington, people know me as the *Fragile States* person, they asked me, what is wrong with America? Is America becoming a *Fragile State*?

Coming back from Nigeria, coming back from Sri Lanka, or wherever I had recently been, if the question doesn't quite make sense, because clearly there's a lot of things doing very well in America, or rich, great companies, great technology, stable government, 200 plus years, constitutional government, and so on and so forth. But something was clearly amiss, and I focused on

relationships and society, and that led me on the journey that led to this book.

You know, given the focus on Fragile States, I'm curious what you think about the academic cottage industry that's kind of emerged, focused on fears of civil war, collapse in the United States, those different categories.

It's true. In the last, I mean, if you think of many decades, if you think of the kind of work I do, I'm broadly speaking in the peace building, peacemaking, conflict prevention field, and this is a field that goes back decades. I mean, I think most clearly post Cold War, from the early 90s, but it surely goes back before then. And there was never much of a focus on polarization, for example, as an issue. And then all of a sudden, since 2016, 2017, there is like this huge movement into the field of, there's like a whole new field, a field of polarization, with hundreds of organizations, many academic studies, loads of articles. And as you said, a cottage industry that, and people think about this now in a global fashion. I mean, really, the only thing that's changed, there's some things have changed in other developed countries with some popular rise of populism and some greater polarization. But for the most parts, the US that changed, and now there's

hundreds of hundreds of organizations and thousands and thousands of people writing, talking, thinking about this. And for the most part, it's very US centric. I think it's very, it's very top down centric. It's too focused on what goes on in the media. I think, I think for the most part, I mean, I think there's some aspects of what they people talk about. I mean, obviously, there's some things that people are saying are right. But very few of these people are neutral in terms of how they see problems. And in my field, the rule number one or principle number one is you need to be neutral, neutral, meaning you look at people on the left, you look at people on the right or whatever the divisions are, ethnic groups, religious groups, whatever it is, and you need to have some sort of neutral third perspective. And so I would say one of the big problems of a lot of these groups is they're not neutral. And again, a lot of them are thinking very much on this elite, top, top media driven. And so my big critique is they're not thinking about how the average American is experiencing life in the recent years and decades. They're not thinking about social dynamics.

They're

more thinking about political dynamics. They're not thinking they tend to be working what I would call downstream. They're not thinking about how things in our society might have been changing that have made polarization and mistrust and alienation and just general unhappiness much more common. They're not connecting their concerns to other problems going on in our society, deaths of despair. Twice as many people died of deaths of drug overdose than died in the whole Vietnam War just last year. Vietnam War was 20 years. And lots of other things were going on in our society. And they're just disconnected. They're focused. And I am generally not a pessimist about American democracy. I'm not a pessimist about our institutions. I am, on the other hand, very worried about what was on in our society and how that affects everything else.

Yeah, I think the follow up to what you just said, because I think I want to really set the table for this episode very specifically, we were discussing before the episode, there are a lot of diagnoses books out there. I've had a lot of podcasts that tend to focus on like, let's discuss the vibe of the country, what's discussed the way that people are experiencing how I really think of this realignment moment. But this book is focused on solutions and society. It's not purely just sort of a top down like let's pass X, Y and Z bill and then we get X, Y and Z results. So can you just introduce this idea of how should we actually go about coming up with solutions versus the kind of semi easy task by now of saying these deaths happen, globalization happened, people have been left behind. Help us understand what solutions look like in that context. First, I think, again, as you said, there's so many books when I put together all the books that I had reviewed to write this book. I need to buy a new bookcase. I have a bookcase of books. My wife does not want another bookcase in our living room, but I have no other place to put it. So I literally have a whole bookshelf, bookcase of books, five bookshelves. And these are a lot of them are good books. They're for the most part, lamenting, diagnosing. I mean, the most prominent book is Bob Putnam, Robert Putnam's books, whether it's Bowling Alone or Our Kids, or he's got his more recent book, but he's got three, four, five books. And they're all great books. They have great data. They have great stories. And the best suggestion I see in there is more family dinners. And I think family dinners are important. We should only try to have our dinners together as a family in my house, but that's not much of a recipe. And I think one of the problems is, is that people who write books and people who think about these problems, they either work at think tanks, they aspire to work in government, they work in academia, and they're not, they're not, first of all, they're not connected to the average American in terms of how that person is living. And when I go to a country, rule number one is get out of your hotel, get into homes, get out of the capital, get around. I mean, read history, read novels, understand what's going on at, at, at, at a, I would call the bottom or the horizontal level of society. And I think a lot of them are not doing that. So when I wrote this book, and this is how I think about everything, I'm always looking for lots of practical examples of what's going on. When I think of country work, I want to use my database of 30, 40 countries, I know very well, to try to come up with some analysis and some people pay me not to diagnose, they're paying me to come up with practical pathways forward in countries. And I'm trying to use my database to come up with what has worked elsewhere, what can we do based upon what they did there, what won't work and so on and so forth. So on this book, my first couple of chapters lay out the problem. And then 75% of my book is basically pivoting to what are people doing. I give a framework that I think is somewhat different than everyone else. I'm focused on place. I'm focused on neighborhoods because we are experiencing, I would say the social crisis in America, not everyone is experiencing it. And those that are experiencing are, it's affecting them different ways, different places, and everything is extremely neighborhood or place dependent in terms of what you're seeing in this country, simply because the lifespan difference, the opportunity difference, family structure difference, and so on and so forth. And then I look for people, organizations that were doing what I thought were important things. So when you have a solutions lens, and then you're looking for examples, and I'm looking at a lot of examples,

and I chose five, five different entry points, and then I examine them and I study them, and I draw lessons from them, and then I draw cross-cutting lessons. I mean, this is a completely different way to think about what we might do. So the book is geared from the beginning in terms of, yes, there is a problem, and I want to define the problem very clearly. And then I want to create some framework about how we might think about the problem differently. And then I want to see what

people are actually doing. And then I want to, once you look at what people are doing, and you have this comparative lens, you can begin to see what is working, what is not working, what might work better, and then draw cross-cutting lessons. And this whole cottage industry exists in the abstract, exists with, I would say, a lot of theory that's not proven, and very little study of something comparative, something practical to draw conclusions about what might work.

So one quick question before we get into that side of this, especially the focus on neighborhoods in place, I'm fascinated by that. You slightly slighted me, I'm kidding when I say that, but obviously when you refer to the fact that Think Tank World and, you know, academia and obviously by consequence- It wasn't personal, Marshall. I'm sure you're the exception that proves the rule. Well, no, I mean, I think the part that's an exception is that I'm aware of this blind spot, but I think we're all trying to, I'm aware of the blind spot, but I don't think I've actually, like, handled it at a broadie level. But here's my question for you. After Trump won in 2016, this narrative became very popular in Think Tank World, the Ocelot Corridor, New York, San Francisco, et cetera. Wow, how could we not have seen Trump coming? He won all of these deindustrialized states in the Midwest. The answer is for us to go visit a diner or go, you know, visit the part of the country that's forgotten, and then we'll kind of figure out the answer, and then that became a joke that people would make because obviously that was so superficial that A didn't actually lead to anything productive, but B became a joke. And then secondly, speaking to your example, the first thing you do in a foreign country is you escape the hotel.

There's a reason why everyone makes fun of Tom Friedman for doing his famous, and then I got in the taxi cab and the taxi driver told me X, Y, and Z. So here's my question for you. How can we get out of the hotel or get out of the Think Tank or our own little podcast world at a deep, serious level versus the unserious version that people kind of parody these days? And one of my chapters, I have five organizations I look at. One of the chapters is on Eastern Kentucky. So each of my chapters has, for the most part, a place and an organization. It is a great organization. They are led by an incredible woman, Dream of Gentry, started at 25, if memory sure isn't me right, and has led this organization. I think for about 25 years, and the organization is now not partners for education. It's evolved into partners for rural impact because it's taking its lessons learned and going to other rural areas around the country.

And when I talked with her, she said something similar to you. A lot of people would come in and they would basically come in and leave. They would come in quickly. And for the most part, they would offer advice. They would be telling them what to do. And they would be bringing models that worked elsewhere, mostly in urban areas. And so when I approached her, I didn't know her. I had an introduction to her because I looked at a lot of people working in education space. And I was looking particularly for an organization that worked on trying to improve the social context around people because that's what my focus is, social dynamics.

And they recommended her. And she's totally something very similar to what you described

about how it's not only people coming in and out, it's also people bringing their worldview with them. It's people bringing their models, their frameworks with them. And so if you read that chapter, I talk a lot about how they're adapting. They look all over the country for nice models, good models, but everything must be changed to fit their context. So how did I do things differently? Well, first of all, my biggest request was let's get in a car and let's go visit and see what you're doing. And let's go here from people on the front line. I think it's really important that we visit families. I mean, I've done homestays in over 30 countries. I mean, I'm a bit older for that now, but I've done homestays in over 30 countries. And I did that for a reason because I want to know what's the, everything from what's the material life like. When I go to a country, I sometimes go a whole day, just get on a bus, see the people on the bus, and also just drive across the country. I want to see what it physically looks like. I want to know about the infrastructure. I want to know about what the average person is doing to make money every day. I want to know what's the nature of their network. And there in Eastern Kentucky, I visited, I went to visit schools, I went to visit families, I went to visit organizations. The key thing is, and I want to hear from them, I always want to hear from someone who's doing something with some success. What can we learn from their experience? I mean, they're there, they've been working on this problem for decades. They're going to know what is working, what is not working. And then if I did that many times, if I was focused on that specific area, I'd be doing that many times with many different organizations. And the thing you learn, of course, in rural America, you can go to places, and there aren't that many people doing things, because except for a few churches and the county governments and the schools, there are no institutions. And there's very little philanthropy and all that type of stuff. But I would say in answer to your question, it's about being real. It's about time. It's about physically looking at things. It's about talking to a lot of people. It's certainly about learning from people who have been there forever. And what have they learned about what works and what doesn't work? I always want to find the right people and learn from them. Yeah. And I think given that answer, you kind of helped me reflect on what I think you could say the flaw of the Thomas Friedman model with the taxi driver, which is, once again, part of the joke is it's unclear if these conversations actually happened. But what he's using the taxi driver model to illustrate is here is a sentence, here is a narrative that fit into an 800 word column. So I think you're describing a process that's much deeper and bigger that you're actually going to affect. We do that. And then also, I think to the point of the DC, we kind of called these DC safari trips. It was kind of that kind of seemingly out of touch, because that's actually kind of what it was. It's sort of, hey, we have this preset worldview. Let's learn some things that will help us remain ultimately secure in that worldview. I mean, there are exceptions. I do want to make it clear. There are some people at these think tanks whose work I really appreciate, and they do very good work. I just think the whole model of the think tank world, it has different goals. Its goal is they're in Washington, they're there to influence policy. They're there to be in some sort of national conversation. Their goal is not to understand Eastern Kentucky. The incentives are not there. And to do well in Washington is almost by definition to not focus on other parts of the world, because it's almost like a bubble that

you need to stay in that bubble to keep climbing. And so there's a lot of incentives against this. So I don't want to be so negative, because I certainly appreciate a lot of the work that they do. Yeah, and I think the real question I have for you given what you just said is, I'd love for you to give us an understanding of your model. You've critiqued the top-down approach versus the horizontal approach, but something that comes to mind or where the recent efforts at alleviating childhood poverty just by increasing the size of the child tax credit. This happened during COVID, it expired in 2022. But if you just look at the studies, it had a huge impact on just reducing childhood poverty very directly. And I was at a conference last week with a bunch of folks who support that type of work, and their takeaway is like, look, this is actually pretty simple. If we're looking at the problems of America, we know how to put money in people's pockets. We know the effects of poverty. I think that's a very strong articulation of what a top-down model of public policy looks like. I'd love you to just reflect on the example of, let's say, the success of that model and addressing some of the causes you're focused on, but also be what the top-down, just put money in the pockets of family with children, what that misses that your horizontal focus captures. How does this all fit together? If you look at the United States, there's a difference of over 40 years in the average lifespan between some neighborhoods and others. I think a more typical difference should be 20, 25 years. I can remember a conversation recently with some people outside Kansas City, and they were telling me that two neighboring counties had a 20-year gap in lifespan. So clearly, in the United States, based upon where you are, you're having a very different life on many, many levels. When I talk horizontal, I'm meaning we don't use national numbers to measure the well-being of Americans. We need to look place by place, and then we need to look within places at the nature of relationships. So I'm thinking about horizontal on two levels, and surely that lifespan gap is just one example. So in terms of the specific policy you mentioned, I surely think there are things that government can do that are helpful. I don't want to say that that's not true. Clearly, if you could reduce the poverty of children, that would be a good thing. However, I will tell you, when we think of children in particular, but any of us, Marshall, you, me, everybody I know, everyone listening to this, our health, our well-being, our happiness is going to depend on some material element, our comfort level, how much money we have in the bank, the type of job we have, type of house we have. But there's another element. There's an element about relationships. I mean, I have a child. I have three children. My youngest child is nine months old. And I will tell you, there's nothing more important for children. But I think it's true for adults just as much. I should say just as much, just clearly for a baby and young children, it's more important. But for all of us, it is important, love, caring, security. And so when I hear about the reduced the poverty of children, I mean, that's a good thing. How will that affect the children in 25 years? I think you have to look at what relationships are around that child, what institutions are supporting that child. I think you have to think about how are they feeling secured day in and day out. We have a huge problem that we have 23 million children in America that are not living in what I would call stable family, what's in a stable family dynamic. And clearly not every married family is good for children because there could be problems with the couple. But the fact that we have so much instability in terms of family, we have so much instability in terms of residency. We have insecurity on many

levels affecting kids and adults. There are a lot of things that are quite different than that specific material outcome that are going to matter for the health of people. So I would say good. There are some policies, but we're looking at a big picture and people who are focused on policy, they're focusing on, let's say, a few slices of a pie. What about all those other slices that matter for our well-being? Why are they never part of this conversation? And for me, we need to look at the whole pie and yes, do the policy and we could debate what the right policy is, but is that half? Is that a third? I can't tell you the answer, but as you can tell, there's a lot of poor people with strong social support and there are a lot of well-off people with not enough social support. And that's not about money. That's about love and care and relationships. So we need to think about this problem in a larger scale and we need to look at the whole pie, in my opinion. And everything you're saying here and reading your book, you're crystallizing a concern I had on a previous episode. I recorded a conversation with Richard Collenberg back in July and he has this book out. I've got the full title here, but it's excluded. It's basically about how nimbyism and basically all these ways that he sees upper middle class America limiting the ability of non-upper middle class Americans to move into their neighborhoods, attend their schools like this, this, and that. And you go through the book and there's all sorts of very legitimate critiques there of snobbery that upper middle class liberals could find themselves hypocritically running into. But halfway through the conversation, I just realized this is such a sad topic because the implicit point that's being made here is we basically no longer know how to help Americans where they are in their neighborhoods where they currently live. And it's the fault of the upper middle class that they aren't willing to just let in as many people as if they're refugees or escapees from a sinking ship to places where we actually do have things actually working. So can you just kind of reflect on that? Because it seems as if we've just kind of given up on that sense. In the contrast to, let's say once again, no child left behind had all sorts of flaws with it, but the implicit point if it's 2001 was, hey, if we do this, this, this, and that, we can make neighborhood schools in a poor part of the country, we can make them better versus the 2023 conversation very quickly becomes, okay, how do we use charter schools or vouchers or pro YMB policies to get people out of these neighborhoods because they basically they're lost. There's nothing we can do because obviously that isn't scalable and you're running into the political limits of what we're going to have in the first place. So I'd love your reflection on this dilemma. Well, I think there's a few points we could say. First, what you said is totally correct. If we want to uplift those Americans who are not participating in that, we have an enormously dynamic economy, we have a dynamic society on many levels, and yet we are leaving so many people behind. We're leaving so many places behind. That's rural, that's suburban, that's urban. And the idea that we're going to move all those people who are in the wrong place to the right place and somehow that is going to solve the problem is a completely unrealistic. It's unrealistic because you're talking about tens of millions of people. I couldn't give you an exact number. It depends how you define the problem, but it's the successful studies, which is some studies by, for example, Rod Chetty or things that he's looked into, they're talking about thousands of people and we're not even talking tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands. We're talking here millions or even tens of millions. So I certainly think that

one goal, if we want to have a flourishing country, we need to think what is required that every place where people live, every neighborhood is flourishing on some level.

I mean, we may never get to 100%, but our goal should be is that every person lives in a flourishing neighborhood. And then we need to think really hard, what does that mean? I mean, flourishing, there is a material aspect, but for me, the starting point is there's a relational aspect, there's a social aspect. Some of that is within the neighborhood. Some of that is from the connection between that neighborhood and the people in the neighborhood and more flourishing dynamic parts of their city or their region or whatnot. So there's what we might call a bonding and a bridging aspect. So for me, the idea that we can, and then no child left behind, whatever you think of the content, at least the concept is right. I mean, again, I think there's great limits to what a federal policy can do to have an impact on the hundreds of thousands, if not more neighborhoods

and places that people live in. There's certainly some things that you can do, but if you're going to build the flourishing society of flourishing neighborhoods, you need to basically have a plan and find ways to work place by place and work across the landscape. So I certainly think we need to think much more place-based, and we need to have indicators of success that are combining what is happening in every place as opposed to having some total number that doesn't reflect how many people are experiencing life in America. So to really get to the meat of it, you described rural America, suburban America, and urban America. There are a bunch of different ways we could create permutations within. Obviously, Williamsburg, Brooklyn is different than like Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. Those are both urban areas. There are upper-class suburbs, super zips, and then there are ex-urbs that are just kind of on the edge of everything where people are struggling, taking 90-minute commutes into the city, and there are rural college towns that are doing really great, and then there are rural parts of the country where the hospital closes. Yes, we're incredibly diverse. It's hard to generalize about anything across the whole country. It really is. But within those three categories, broadly, though, rural, suburban, urban, help us understand some of the different neighborhoods that would appear there, and then what would you articulate as the problem or the challenge facing each category?

Okay. Again, that's a big question. That's a big question. So clearly, a neighborhood in New York and a neighborhood in Detroit are going to have quite different. I mean, I have a chapter on Detroit and to drive around the landscape of Detroit as it is today. I mean, it's like going to a post-war situation with, I mean, literally neighborhoods that have disappeared and there's just some leftover houses that have collapsed and some green space and even farms, and it's great. But I would say in general, the advantage of an urban area, especially if you're in a bigger city, is there's likely going to be some areas of success in that you can connect to.

Of course, when I think about where we should focus our energy, I don't think we should focus our energy on the most remote neighborhood. I think we should look for assets like a university or a big hospital or government offices or it could be a green area or whatever it is, some cultural institution. Focus on anchors for success. Focus on distance or relationship to places of success. And I think you should build around those anchors and across that space in a strategic manner. So we have a greater chance of success. If you just choose the place that's most distant and marginalized, this is especially true in an urban context. If it's most cut off and there's many other bad or difficult neighborhoods between it and places that are working well,

I think that's much harder to succeed. So I certainly think in the urban context, you can be very strategic about what neighborhoods you focus on and you try to have what I would call a spacial strategy, building on assets to try to improve more and more neighborhoods. There's no one size fits all. Every city will be different. Some cities will have more things they can build on than others, but that at least gives you a framework. Suburban areas, I would say the prominent suburban America, and this encompasses a large, certainly a huge amount of the country, is that our suburban areas are built in a way that is often placeless. And I think it's really important, and this goes urban, suburban, rural, is that everyone lives in a place with an identity, with clear boundaries, with a center, with a set of local institutions, with mechanisms for people to meet regularly, whether that's restaurants or bars. I mean, bars are a great way in some places to meet. Restaurants, coffee shops, if you're in Williamsburg, New York, it's probably coffee shops. I could tell you personally about the bars and maybe in some other part of New York. But I would say that you have to create this sense of that we are together, some sort of idea that people are together, and American suburbs are really built in a way to maximize loneliness, maximize isolation, lots of houses. The houses may be nice, but they have no connection with each other. You don't go to local church. If you go to church, you don't go to, your kids don't go to local school. There's no civic associations that are place-based, mostly they're larger organizations that you might volunteer. There's nothing that is bringing people together in a place. So that's an area, I mean, this problem could go urban, suburban, rural, but of course it's, I think that's particularly true in a lot of suburban America. And I would say in rural, again, you have places that are doing very well, but the challenge of rural is the distance between people. The challenge of rural is that there tends to be not a lot of institutions in some places. And I think you're doing anything you can to thicken institutions. That could be mean trying to help people start other institutions. You're trying to build mechanisms that bring people together so they can collectively work with each other. I think the fact that you can, my chapter on Eastern Kentucky basically looks at a regional, not a neighborhood, but a regional organization that's in some ways an anchor that brings in financial flows and then works across many, many counties to try to uplift probably about 20 or so counties in Eastern Kentucky. So this idea that you might build some sort of regional hub that tries to work with a lot of different places, I certainly think that would be a, and then again, you're always trying to connect those places to other places of success. What I'd love to know, we were discussing this before the episode and you were worried this would be a little too academic, but I actually think it's deeply important. So I'd love to ask you about your theory of change when it comes to all of this, because I think what gets frustrating for me is as a podcaster who does broad episodes and conversations and reads books around the state of American society, I see a huge gap between the diagnosis, the stories, the individual, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and the energy by which we as a society are actually attacking and doing different things. There was a really great piece in The New York Times a few weeks ago about Oregon and Portland, Oregon specifically in the wake of the fentanyl crisis and was focused on how due to a lack of funding and some, let's just say, bad political decisions around equalization of drugs, you've had a situation where there's a lot of drug uses, a lot of crime,

and basically the police can't keep up, so now there's like privatized security, that's sort of like taking care of things, which I don't know, based on love, I don't think is healthy for a society of securities of public good. I texted a friend back in Portland about this and I said, hey, this is bad, what are you going to do about this? And he basically didn't have a response because I think we lack, we have the ability to diagnose these things. To all agree, the broken neighborhoods you're describing in the book are real, but we lack an actual ability to translate that into I think a project that matches the moment. I think probably the only thing we have is the ability to say, let's do a new deal or let's do another great society, which whether or not those were the proper responses to the problems of their time, there's just so much legislative lockdown, log jam that we're not going to pass a big bill like that. So it seems as if the option you're describing here is all we have. So what's your theory, that was long, but I think the context really matters, what's your theory of change giving all these dynamics I just illustrated? I do believe government has a role, but I think we need to think about the problem in a completely different way. And again, I want to mention again, this statistic, that over 100,000 Americans died from a drug overdose in each of the last couple of years. The total is roughly twice what the number of people who died in the Vietnam War over 20 years. And that happens in one year. And it's really hard for me to find this story in the media. And in many ways, it's the biggest story in America, actually, if you think about it, that that many people could die. It is arguably the biggest story in the country. And I can find very little coverage of it. I mean, you could argue another big story is the story of how children, the instability of the homes and the relationships supporting children. Those to me, when I did the research for this book, those were the two statistics that most struck me and that we have the biggest gap with other developed countries. I mean, there's a lot of other issues we have, polarization and whatnot. But so the first thing I think is we need to look at all of these social problems, whether it's the problem of children, the problems of deaths of the spare, the problems of mistrust, depression, there's this huge report out this year from the Surgeon General about loneliness and social isolation. These are not separate problems. And they're all downstream from something that has changed in our relationships and the institutions and structures that support those relationships. So when I think about what government could do, or what nonprofits could do, or what philanthropists could do, or what you the listeners and what you Marshall could do, but what you the listeners or viewers of this could do, I think the first thing is we need to think this is a problem of structure and institutions, structures and institutions in our society. It is less a problem of policy and a problem of material, material goods. And what I mean by that is we used to all live in neighborhoods of some form and that were rich, that were abundant in institutions, family institutions, interfamily, interfamily networks, everything from churches to local schools to local restaurants, to local shops to the shopping, the local businesses, the local nonprofits. We used to all live in those neighborhoods. I mean, I currently live in a neighborhood very much like that. And I could speak about that. And I know when I go to the restaurant or the cafe near me about, I don't know, about seven, eight minute walk from where I live,

I can't go in without meeting people I know. I mean, I know the owner of one relatively well. I know there's like three of them right near me, but I go to the supermarket in that same little strip. And I will see people I know. And if I walk down the streets, I have a feeling of, I would say a feeling of joy, because I know who's behind these doors. And I know many of our neighbors. I mean, I may not be friends with a lot of them, but I know hundreds of people and I have a relationship on some level with hundreds of them. My daughter goes to school. It's from the community. And so two thirds or three quarters of our classmates are walking distance away. That's my oldest child, my 11 year old. And so I think what we need to think of is that most Americans live as I still live. And today they live in a world in which they have very little engagement with their neighbors, that institutions around them have collapsed or don't exist. There's not many ways for them to find support on a personal level, unless it's someone that might be some member of their family and family ties are weaker, might be someone in their neighborhood. But those ties are weaker. There might be some nonprofits, but they tend to be doing things for you and satisfying some specific need. They're not with you. You're not a member of them. You're not working with others to help everybody. The world is completely different. And if we think about structures, we need to think about what is it that we can do as a country to, I would say, encourage every place that people live in to actually be a place with an identity, with a center. That's why I focus on neighborhoods. Everyone must live in a neighborhood. And there's things that make a neighborhood special. It has boundaries. It has a name. It has a sense of that I'm a member of this. And then there needs to be a lot of institutions. Some of that could be religious, but there could be businesses, there could be shops, there could be civic institutions. It could be that government is restructured around neighborhoods. And we could talk about that. There's so many things that we can do as a society to change the structures in society. And I'll just give one very practical example. Government today focuses on housing. It focuses on health care. It focuses on education and so on and so forth. It focuses on security, police. Those are silos. Those are being measured for the most part by units. How many housing units that I build? How many people that I treat? How many kids did I get through the school? I would argue that government will be much more effective if government was structured around neighborhoods and that there were meta indicators of success. And there were teams of people who are responsible for neighborhoods and the functions, the silos reported to them and that those people's job was to make each place flourish. And they were not being evaluated on units that would be affected by a policy. They were being evaluated on the success of a place. And we don't need more. We need different. And that is the key point. We need different and we need to redesign the landscape physically in some cases and redesign the landscape institutionally in almost every case so that people live in places with institutions that they can contribute, belong to, and that everything in our society was oriented towards making those places succeed. So for the last question here, I really appreciate your description of how neighborhood life has really collapsed during the latter half of the 20th century. And the key thing is, is that even if you were to describe for us a part of the country where in the 20th century you had deep rural poverty or you had a working class area of a city that materially suffered, they still had strong neighborhood life. There were civic associations, church, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So I think in many ways we've managed to address some of the material concerns. We're also not addressing

the collapse of that civic neighborly togetherness. So that's very important. But I guess my question is, do these things regenerate on their own? I guess is there a possibility that you could reach a point where everyone's just so lonely and sort of cut off from one another that they kind of realize, okay, I'm going to search for a church or I'm going to start a book club or I'm going to do this, this, this or that. Is this a process that could eventually resolve itself or is there going to need to really be fingers not just top down but horizontally that are pushed on the scale if you think about this? First, I think I want to point out that in reference to something you started with is that there are poor places that are socially rich and there's a lot of materially well off places that are socially poor. And we need to think of the Amish as a very good example as a place that's relatively poor or not very materially well off, but the focus of their community is to bring people together and have strong social ties and strong togetherness. So there surely is, first of all, we need to differentiate. And then I think it's important to understand that these dynamics, they work in either a vicious or a virtuous cycle. If you live in a neighborhood with rich, with a lot of institutions and a lot of relationships like the place I live in, I mean, everyone is, people feel a desire. I mean, I feel a joy. I feel a need. If something is happening that's bringing people together in my neighborhood, I want to go. I want to join. I'll give an example. I live at 910 on my street. At 903, there's a woman there that's not very talkative, must be in her 50s, not very tall. You couldn't think, you look at her, you may not think too much of her, yet think what this woman does. I know for a fact, because I see it, every weekend, she goes around and visits people who live alone. I know her mother lives a few blocks from her and her mother is alone. And maybe that's the starting point. But I know she goes to my immediate neighbor on the other side and she visits that person for 20, 30 minutes. I know she walks up and down the streets and I have no idea how many people she lives, she visits. That same woman is the woman who organized the cleanup in the park. It's the same one who organized volunteer work to go and help some nonprofit organize. I guess they're getting in-kind donations, lots of clothes and toys and wants people to go in. So she's doing all these things. But there's a lot of people in my neighborhood like that. When COVID happened, the default was, let's put benches in front of our house or let's put benches. We have carports here. Don't ask me why. I'm not a fan of carports. I've never even seen them before I came here. But people would put sofas in their carport where it was dry and then eventually heaters came in the carport when the weather got cold. And everyone's default was we need to be relational. We need to volunteer. We need to form WhatsApp groups. I use WhatsApp for work. I never used it in terms of a social group. But immediately when COVID happened, people started volunteering, starting WhatsApp groups for this purpose, for that purpose. And so when you live in a place in which you have these healthy dynamics about people helping each other, it just feeds on itself. You have a desire. You feel a sense of commitment. I don't want to say quite a sense of obligation, but it becomes an obligation because you feel it's something you want to do. And if you live in a place where no one knows each other and there's no opportunity to meet each other, how do you change that dynamic? I mean, that's really hard. I do think every individual, someone who's listening to this, if they feel that they can do something in their neighborhood, they can try to change the dynamic. I certainly think

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the groups are finding a few people together and then starting something can be very helpful. I certainly think looking for local associations or organizations and somehow leveraging them, I certainly think you could bring several of these together and try to do some sort of neighborhood-wide initiative. In terms of the broader level, we as a society have this problem of what is going on and how people are experiencing things, and it's much harder to change that.

But

for example, if I give money, I would rather give money. I do give money to some faraway causes, but I would rather give money to a local institution, something that was right near where I live or in my neighborhood. And for example, if our tax credit for donations was somehow incentivizing people to give to a local institution in a neighborhood where they lived, as opposed to just giving money to some advocacy organization or some distant organization doing things for people on a large scale, that would be a simple thing that people could change.

Seth, that's all very, very interesting. The book is *Fragile Neighborhoods, Repairing American Society, one zip code at a time*. Thank you so much for joining me on *The Realignment*.

Thank you, Marshall. I look forward to meeting you in person soon.

Thanks.

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