

[Transcript] The Realignment / 420 | Nikhil Goyal: Child Poverty Doubled Last Year - What Does that Mean for Our Safety Net?

Marshall here. Welcome back to the Realignment.

Today's episode builds on Tuesday's conversation with Melissa Carney.

There, we focused on the role of family structure in inequality issues in the United States.

Today, I'm looking at the role of government when it comes to alleviating poverty in the U.S., especially after COVID payment supports expired last year.

My guest today is Nikhil Goyal, a sociologist and policymaker who served as a senior policy advisor for Senator Bernie Sanders. Nikhil has two things that he recently wrote that are especially worth reading. The first is a guest essay in The New York Times from September, titled America Pulled, Children Out of Poverty. Now it's set to reverse course with the vengeance.

And Yostra released a new book back in August, Live to See the Day,

Coming of Age in American Poverty. The underlying story here is as part of the response to COVID, the U.S. federal government significantly reduced the child poverty rate by pouring resources into vulnerable families and the obviously affected children. As part of the exploration of those benefits, child poverty really came rolling back. Now you can have all sorts of qualms with our approach to poverty in this country and the obvious philosophical debates about the role of government in those issues. But I just think the stark increase in poverty after the supports expired gets to the core of the debate that we should be having in this country about how government

should impact the lives of those back home. This is a great conversation and I really recommend you engage with all of Nikhil's work. He is very young, a few years younger than me, but I definitely think he's a voice who we will all be hearing from more in the future. Hope you all enjoy this conversation and a huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation supporting the work of this podcast.

Nikhil Goyal, welcome to the Realignment. Thanks so much for having me. I am so excited to speak with

you. I want to just say a quick note to the audience if you'll give me a second here. What's been really cool about doing the Realignment podcast and especially starting the podcast when I was 27 was that over time I've been able to transition the podcast purely from speaking to some August person who I've been hearing about for decades to having conversations like the one I'm about to have right now. Nikhil is so interesting. I think he is incredibly promising and I think for a lot of folks this is going to be your introduction to his work. So that's just an exciting thing that's been able to evolve. So let's just start with the introduction. Who are you? What's your background? What work did you do for Bernie Sanders? And then we can get into the actual topic at hand.

Norm, well thanks so much again for having me and engaging with this book and my work.

So I grew up on Long Island, went to well-funded, affluent public schools, spent a lot of time writing about the public education system and the lives of children experiencing various systems of institutions. And then I went off to Goddard College, a small liberal arts school in Vermont which was started by a disciple of John Dewey and prizes experiential and self-directed learning, the community as the classroom and the curriculum and just a very fascinating model of progressive education. And I took those experiences and decided that I was going to go to grad school and went off to the University of Cambridge where I did my master's and PhD in sociology of education. And after the PhD I had the enormous and incredible opportunity to work for Senator Sanders on the Senate Budget Committee starting in March 2021. My very first day was the day the

American Rescue Plan was passed by the U.S. Senate and was there for two years and just left a couple months ago. That's fascinating. So let's actually get into that. I think the newest aspect of this conversation and the aspect which folks can just see a New York Times op-ed you wrote that link to has been the Census Bureau's reveal of the fact that the child poverty rate doubled last year, which is actually the largest single-year increase in our country's history. What's happening there? What's your summation of that? Yeah, no, it's just an incredible and harrowing development. Every September the Census Bureau comes out with their annual poverty report. They have the official poverty measure as well as the supplemental poverty measure in recent years and on SPM, which is considered by scholars and economists and other experts to be more accurate depiction of the level of poverty in this country, that the SPM level for child poverty doubled from 5.1 to more than 12 percent, which meant that five million children were plunged into poverty in just a single year, the largest single yearly increase in American history. The reason for that, as they point and other people have pointed in the past, is due to the expiration of the Expansional Tax Rate and other pandemic-era social and economic programs that lifted millions and millions of children and families out of poverty and economic insecurity. Something I wonder, and obviously there's a bracketed timeline on those additional levels of support that folks got, but I'm wondering, especially given the story that you tell in the book, is it possible that just getting support for one year, is that in the long term going to be transformative? So let's say there's this one year where this first grader can have the proper school uniform, doesn't have to have any issues with transportation, something gets fixed. In the book, there are so many instances of, well, there's this broken tiling and the bathtub is going to collapse into the actual kitchen. What is the impact of the ability to handle those issues for one year going to be long-term meaningful, or is this just going to be going to go to zero over time? Yeah, no, it's a very important question. You referenced the book, which came out of my graduate studies called *Live to See the Day, Coming of Age and American Poverty*, where I followed three Puerto Rican kids, grew up in the poorest neighborhood of Philadelphia called Kensington. So the question around whether, say you had one year of economic security and stability, well-funded public school, you had all the basic necessities for a dignified life, obviously that's going to improve your quality of life for that year. The question is whether that will continue beyond that. And I think the poverty report, as well as other economic indicators have shown that when those programs expire, when they wind down, people will often be thrown back into the same or similar situations as they were before those programs began. And you can see that not just with the expenditure tax credits, but the expiration of the SNAP emergency allotments, food and securities at the highest levels in three years. You see it on housing as a result of the expiration of the emergency rental assistance and some of the other tenant protections that were given to tenants during the pandemic, and as well as the eviction moratorium, housing insecurity, particularly homelessness, has reached record levels. And so I think the research and the data show that unless these programs are made permanent, people will fall back into the economic insecurity that they faced in the past. So I'm just going to say I'm going to play dumb,

but I actually have no expertise in this field, so actually I'm just asking questions that are coming to mind. Why do people fall back into poverty after receiving the supports that they've been given? So once again, the book does a great job of articulating this. If you've gotten money for a year or two to fix up your car or buy a proper fitting set of clothes, it seems like maybe you could have raised the floor for yourself or you could have just been in a little bit more of a stable position and therefore be able to experience the American dream and kind of move out of that precarious state. So if that's not quite possible, I'm wondering is there a way that we could structure aid to families, aid to children, aid to just individuals, so that we're not merely offering a temporary bandaid that could be removed with the expiration of political will, but would actually move someone up to the next stage of development or just the general rung on the American class structure? How do you think about that? I think it's important to just recognize that a sizable share of America's poor are children and these are people that are not working. Even if the economy is doing incredibly well in terms of low unemployment and lower inflation and a tight labor market, children are, they need those basic economic and social benefits and the various public assistance programs just to maintain a sense of livelihood. And so I think the pandemic showed that during those economic cushions allowed people to have a sense of stability for that period of time and for some that might have meant that they could then go out and get a higher-paying job. And we saw with the pandemic and the American Rescue Plan and other economic

policies that because of the tight labor market, wages for the lowest income people have actually gone up at very high levels, more than we've seen in many decades. We've seen decades of wage, compression, and stagnation, but during the pandemic and in the aftermath of the pandemic, those groups of people have actually seen enormous wage increases. The question is, will that sustain over time? That is yet to be actually fully understood. But yeah,

I think it's important to recognize that a lot of these folks who are poor and low-income are children, elderly, disabled, people who need those safety net programs, not just to survive, but to have some level of stability in their lives. And what quote-unquote went wrong here? Why did these benefits with very clear... So for example, this isn't a amorphous policy program from the 70s where we could debate, did this have impact? Did this work? Is there a limit to what the federal government can do? Very clearly at a pure data level, it's been agreed that there was a deep, deep, deep impact here. So if that's true, what do you see is happening that caused them to expire of art renewal? Sure. And I think it's important to just point out that, as you were alluding to, poverty is not some intractable problem. It's seen as this very complex problem from, at least in the way the public views it, but it's actually a very solvable issue. During the pandemic, both the Republican president, Donald Trump, and a Democratic president,

Joe Biden, enacted trillions and trillions of dollars of social spending in the form of the economic impact payments of expanded unemployment insurance and the expanded child tax credit. And together, collectively, that lifted millions of children and families out of poverty. And when the child tax credit expired, the expanded version in December of 2021, 3 million kids who were plunged back into poverty immediately. The data was just harrowing of what we saw in starting in 2022. And when I was at the Senate, there was this thought among Democratic policymakers

that if we're going to have this temporary expansion of the CTC, then surely the American public will rally behind this program. And there's no way that that will not be able to make this a permanent measure. And I think that was, obviously, that was wrong. And that inclination was especially wrong during this very polarizing time in Washington. And I think there was a number of challenges as part of that. One was a lot of people didn't realize that they were getting the CTC. They thought it was, say, another stimulus check or another economic impact payment. They didn't view it as a separate entity. And then two, I think there was a problem of messaging. 60 million children got the CTC in July, August, September, and onwards. 60 million kids. I mean, that was a remarkable achievement in social policy. And I wish the president had made a primetime speech. I wish every Democratic member of Congress held a town hall in July of 2021 to announce to the public that we reduced child poverty more than any other administration and Congress in recent American history. That we made it so that middle income and low income families could more easily afford childcare and housing and healthcare and other basic necessities. They did not take sufficient credit for that. And Trump during the early stage of the pandemic often would say that, oh, I want to sign the stimulus checks. And Democrats were lambasting him and ridiculing him for that. But I would actually say that that inclination was correct because too often public policy is hidden. People don't necessarily see the effects of it. There's sociologists and other scholars call this a hidden welfare state. People don't recognize how much government benefits their lives on a daily basis. And so I think in terms of, one, the fact that people didn't know they were getting the CTC, and then second, the failure of messaging. And then finally, the fact that Senator Manchin and 50 Senate Republicans were not in support of the proposal. All of that collectively, I think, led to the demise of that program. And then we're also seeing that with a number of the other programs that I mentioned, SNAP or Housing Assistance or Medicaid expansion, everything is just falling by the wayside. And we're seeing a rebounding of economic security levels that we have not seen in several years. Here's something I'd love for you to explain from an insider perspective. During the past several years, especially really since Trump's election and some of the dissatisfaction with the fallout of Obamacare, there's been significant energy on the progressive left directed towards passing universal healthcare. And this wasn't just sort of an academic think-tank podcast. There were whole parts of the 2020 Democratic primary where you had very wonky on-the-debate stage debates about the nuances of this policy versus that policy, who actually supported it versus didn't support it. But just hearing the story you just told me from a pure pragmatism perspective, from a pure, can this actually be passed? And actually, we can see in a time of diminishing budgets and austerity, there's actually energy to pass this and have impact. Why doesn't expanding the CTC and other policies of child tax credit attract the same amount of energy from the left as, I don't want to say pie in the sky, because universal healthcare would obviously have a real effect. But from a pure legislative math perspective, I think it is literally impossible to get your mansion on board, some form of universal healthcare. I do not think it was impossible with, I think, slightly different timelines or approaches to get them on board a child tax credit expansion.

So I'd love to hear your perspective on that take. Yeah, no, it's an interesting point. I think the fact that the federal government issued stimulus checks in 2020 and 2021 provided space for a robust conversation and public demand for an expanded child tax credit. I think that people were attuned to the idea that the government could give you a check for some period of time. And I think that allowed Democrats to go big and bold. For a number of years, there's been, all the way from Senator Michael Bennett to Representative Rosa DeLauro have been pushing for universal child allowance modeled after the child tax credit. And I think the pandemic gave space for that. And then the president, when he took office with what egged on by House and Senate Democrats, decided to make this a cornerstone of his agenda. I think universal healthcare is a little bit more, obviously, a lot more complicated, because there's a lot more public, there's very, very competing interests, and there's a lot more money, I think, involved in terms of lobbying on either side. And then, obviously, you have one of the most well-funded industries, the healthcare and pharmaceutical industry that would be directly impacted by any public policy in that sphere. And I would say that I wish there was more, there would have been more interest by progressive organizations fighting for the expanded CTC. There was some incredible work by the Economic Security Project and other groups, but it was relatively minimal compared to fighting for other programs. I think that's perhaps borne out of the fact that the expanded CTC proposal is a relatively new one. It's not one that has been debated for decades. And so I think that, to me, is the dilemma that Democrats partly face. And I think, yes, as you point out, I think if we had started with Build Back Better, if we had tried the expanded Child Tax Credit on a permanent basis earlier on before the Afghanistan withdrawal, inflation going up, the Delta virus emerging, I think if you had that debate happen before the summer of 2021 and the fall of 2021, then I think we probably would have been able to pass an expanded Child Tax Credit and get that through. I'd love to hear, my politics are pretty centrist. So a book like this and a person like you is actually an important, are important checks on my instincts, because my instinct is to say, okay, here's why we can't do this, this, this for that. Here's why, okay, Nikhil, you're ignoring this political dynamic or this thing. When you talk about these policies, even when you write this book, you're basically just laying it out in front of me saying, actually, here are the stakes. And actually, during a period, we actually were able to do it. So I would love for you, without me interrupting with any, well, actually, we can't do that. Just give me the, I guess, kind of pretend it's the 1960s. And we don't have like a political economy that's been checked by the Vietnam War and Nixon and Watergate and like a lack of trust in government. And that thing is not quite going the direction that, you know, FDR, Kennedy, Johnson, Democrats wanted, like, what is it like, use your imagination, like, what can we achieve if we had the will within reason when it comes to American poverty? It's a good question. I mean, I thought a lot about this. And when I was at the Senate, it really felt in the first year of my tenure there that I was in the shoes and similar shoes that the architects of the New Deal and the Great Society were once in. And it felt like there was a real moment where we could come together as a country and finish the unfinished business of the Great Society, of the Civil Rights Movement, of the Poor People's Campaign. And it felt I had an enormous weight of responsibility on my shoulders as a policymaker

in that way. And now I think especially was the case because I had spent the past several years working and interviewing and conducting research in the poorest, one of the poorest neighborhoods in this country, Kensington. So I knew the stakes at play. I knew that there was, I had witnessed enormous suffering and pain afflicting poor and middle income people. And that it was, to me, it was incredibly important that governments step up and reduce that suffering and that pain. And if we didn't, that would allow, that would, I think, push people to accept more authoritarian, anti-democratic forces and mindsets and policies. So I think we had, there was great urgency at the moment. I think it starts from the idea that we should build a cradle to grave social democratic state. So you start from the beginning. You start with neonatal care and early childhood education, universal preschool and childcare, so that there's a birth through five early care system where regardless of your income, every child is cared for and has a safe place to be during those critical years of the development. And then, if I had to design it, that would be a part and parcel of the larger K-12 system. We have a very fragmented childcare and pre-K system compared to the K-12 system. You have some private providers and you have some public providers and then a parent might have to send their kid to a public pre-K for a couple of hours and then at 3 p.m. they have to leave work and then go to send their kid to the private childcare a couple of miles away. It's very dysfunctional and it's not designed to design to help working parents in any regard. So you start with early childhood education, then you go through to the K-12 system and fully funded public schools. And I talk about how in Philadelphia you have a school system that has been deliberately starved of resources by Harrisburg and by the federal government. Typically speaking, and I think this will be important for your viewers and listeners, the federal government has a relatively small role in larger public education. Roughly speaking, 7% of schools spending comes from the federal government and then about 45-47% comes from the state and then the same amount comes from local property taxes. But in the most regressive states like Pennsylvania, only 37-38% of a school's funding is coming from the state and the rest is coming from the local property taxes. We put a burden on cities, particularly cities with low tax bases, to fund their schools. And then you add, you compound that with the fact that you are dealing with a very economically marginalized population, by and large, almost every child or the vast majority of kids living in poverty or economic insecurity. Then you deal with the fact that you have school buildings that are literally falling apart with thebestos and lead and lack of air conditioning and humane safe classrooms. And then you add the fact that you're paying teachers abysmal salaries, salaries that you could probably, in some places, you could probably earn more at working at McDonald's or Walmart than being a teacher. And then, so you start with early childhood education, you fully fund the schools. And then you think about all the other institutions that children interact with healthcare. I'm a big believer, whether we can debate Medicare for all or single payer, but at the very least, I'm a big believer in Medicare for kids, covering kids in totality under a Medicare system. And then, obviously, trying to reduce the Medicare eligibility age on the upper echelon. Housing, making sure that every child is a safe place to live. And investment in affordable housing, all types of housing, whether that might mean luxury developments all the way to affordable units, I think we just need more housing. And

then, particularly, housing located in transit and near public transit so that people can get access to those benefits. And then on safe neighborhoods, I think the book really tries to show that everyone deserves to be able to walk down the street in their neighborhood without the fear of getting shot, assaulted, or mugged. That, I think, is a basic human right. And I think when we talk about crime and we talk about social dislocation, it is very important that we address the root causes of those social ills in a comprehensive way. We shouldn't shy away from that in any respect. And then, finally, I think in terms of a full employment economy, investing in public employment, in living wage jobs, whether that might mean really a civilian climate core so that people can enter decent, dignified work in an environmental sector. And then, you know, other things around food insecurity and other issues. So, I think, to me, it's a comprehensive agenda. And I think the brilliance of Build Back Better was that it would have virtually touched the life of every American in every sector and phase of their life. Tuition for public college, home health care, affordable housing investment, paid family medical leave, Medicare to include dental vision and hearing care. I think the research shows very clearly that when you make those investments on the front end, you will ultimately reduce costs on the back end in the form of lower crime, lower spending on public assistance programs, and lower economic productivity. And I also point out at the end of the book, a study by the National Academies about child poverty, which says that the annual toll of child poverty is \$800 billion to \$1.1 trillion each year. So, it doesn't matter whether, you know, if you're a listener, you don't care about child poverty. That's your prerogative. But this is money coming out of your own pocket. This is money taken out of all of our pockets. It affects whether you are rich, poor, or working class. And so, I think, to me, the investments that we make on the front end will ultimately make our society more equitable, it will make our society safer, and it will make our society more democratic in totality. I'd love to hear from you to bring my DC side back into things. What do you think is the sustainable political project that could bring about what you just described here? Because if we think about the war on poverty, the war on poverty emerges towards the tail end, obviously, of the FDR era. But it's emerging from a United States, which is one World War II. It's at the height of its economic power. It's before Vietnam has gone truly bad. So, you're at the real height of confidence in that frame. It's the America that's going to the moon. You know, in the book, like we could critique welfare, we're ending welfare as we know it, if you're Bill Clinton in the 1990s. But something that I think younger people from our cohort who tend to miss when they attack Bill Clinton and Joe Biden in the Democrats of the 1990s was that I don't think for good or for ill, the welfare and social policies of the 60s were sustainable in the 1990s and the 1980s in the same way. So, ending big government as we know it, ending welfare as we know it, those were very specific political attempts designed to prevent a Republican from winning election in 1996, and for preventing Newt Gingrich from having a successful midterms in 1998, which once again actually works. You have Democrats winning the presidency consistently. Obviously, Al Gore doesn't become president, but he wins the popular vote compared to Ronald Reagan in 1984. So, could you speak to the political project aspect of this? Because I think that's the strongest

critique that centrists just have, which is this is just not politically sustainable. Politics is about the art of the possible rather than the art of like, okay, if we could magically, technocratically set A and X amount, we'd live in this world. So, I'd love you to speak to that. Speak to that. Yeah, I think it's, you know, I appreciate you recounting some of that history because I think the politics of today are vastly different. And I'm a big believer in focusing, and Democrats focusing on bread and butter economic issues. I think the job of the party is to explain and to show people that we will make your lives better. And, you know, I joke around sometimes to my colleagues and former colleagues and my friends that, you know, perhaps Joe Biden should have called bill back better the anti crime bill of 2021. And there was, as we saw in the aftermath of the pandemic, a major rise in violent crime in some American cities. I, you know, I would have said that these are all policies that would have reduced the level of crime and social dislocation in this country. But I think it goes my larger point is, again, the how we should focus on the policies and programs that will provide people with decent standard of living. And to, I think it's important to also pick the fights and to name the enemy. You know, I am very impressed and amazed by the rejuvenation of the labor movement, whether it's Amazon workers or Starbucks workers or UAW workers on strike. You know, I think there's a revived labor movement. And I think that is the core of my politics, where to show people that you can fight for your rights, fight for decent wages and good benefits. And the question obviously is how will that trickle to the rest of the American economy. And, you know, it is very tough because you're dealing with that piece, but you're also dealing with a Congress that is completely dysfunctional, where, you know, we have a situation where we can't get even basic bills voted on. And I don't have too much hope at the federal level for my policies to or these ideas to be enacted as long as there's a Republican-led house. There needs to be a Democratic trifecta again for any of these policies to have a chance in the future. And I also just want to note that it is, you know, just compare the Democratic Party and Congress of say 2010 or even 2015 to the party in Congress of 2021.

You would not find 49 Senate Democrats on board with \$1.75 trillion of spending. That is a remarkable achievement. You would not find 48 Democrats on board with \$3.5 trillion of social and economic spending. The party is, you know, thanks to, I think, Senator Sanders, to Senator Warren, Black Lives Matter, the Occupy Movement, Fight for 15, the trade unions, all of that together

as well as the pandemic, I think shifted our politics in a leftward direction and provided the intellectual oxygen as well as the political space for a changing conception of what government can do. So that, to me, is, I think, an achievement even as we couldn't get everything across the finish line. That, I think, gives me hope that next time when Democrats have control of all three branches, sorry, all three chambers, that we can get something big across. And, you know, the question around the great FDR and the great society, I always try to make it clear that what I'm proposing are inherently American ideas. It is directly reviving the spirit of the New Deal and the great society. And I think it would do progressives and Democrats a service if we couched our rhetoric in a more patriotic American agenda around combating economic insecurity and inequality. I think that would be more helpful than talking about socialism and democratic socialism. I think those are words and policies and ideologies that turn

off people. But when you talk about how we are going to finish the New Deal project and we're going to fight for democratic democracy in our workplaces, in our economic and social institutions, in our schools, that, I think, is more compelling and more meaningful to people than talking about democratic socialism or so forth. Well, and I think that's really well stated, just in the sense that if you actually look at the model for the ideal, and once again, insert statement of the New Deal didn't include, and I'm not saying it's dismissal, but the New Deal, especially if you're talking about black people in the South, all sorts of flaws in it, but broadly we're talking about it as a model for mass political and economic change in the face of a crisis opportunity. It's not couched in purely revolutionary terms. At a policy level, it's revolutionary, but FDR actually uses that kind of Bismarckian, this is how we retain the social order by extending rights, by extending this, this, this, and that. The same thing is true. LBJ is not a revolutionary. So I think there's interesting dynamic where folks who, I kind of worry that something that's happened in our politics is people who should be filling one function have fallen into other functions. So I think activists play a very, very, very important role. Like I just said earlier, you're kind of here with this book, which isn't purely, it's academic. It's popular, it's academic, but it's so it's activism adjacent, but your job is to take this book and be like, okay, think tank scholar Marshall, take your foreign policy hat off for a second and confront the face of American poverty. That's actually like a really important thing. And I also think to your point, a fight for 15 organizer, that's actually a very, very, very important thing that actually moves things on the ground. But clearly, you've had a bunch of people who are activists, I think enter into policy roles, and a bunch of policy people who like are actually policy-brained enter into the activism spaces. And I just every, I kind of see this when I'm chatting with people, it becomes kind of like frustrating in that context. So I'm curious if you, because you're wearing a bunch of different hats here, what are your thoughts on that idea? Sure. Yeah, no, it's interesting because I have been an organizer, I've been a policy maker, and I'm a journalist and a sociologist. So yeah, I have all these different hats that I'm wearing. And it's always a sort of thing which hat am I wearing at one time? But to me, you know, perhaps I can answer that by talking a little bit about messaging. I think the question around message discipline is one that a lot of activists, unfortunately, have not learned. I think you can talk about that in the context of the uprisings in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and the way people talk about policing and criminal justice and crime. I also think there's, you know, I was really, I was dismayed by the fact that a lot of progressive activists were not involved in the fight for Build Back Better. I think that when we talk about, you know, you can talk about various criminal justice policies, and we can debate those, the effectiveness of various slogans and policies. But I think inherently, if we're trying to ensure that people are living dignified lives, then you would fight for something like Build Back Better. And so I was disappointed that that was not a demand, that people were not in the streets pushing for those programs in the same way that they were pushing for other anti-carceral policies in 2020 and 2021. So I think the message discipline is, I think, is incredibly important. I think people need to pull their ideas and their policies. They need to figure out what policies are actually most attractive to the general electorate. And that doesn't mean that you don't support those other things, but it means that you prioritize one thing over another.

And I think it goes back to the point I made around bread and butter issues, talking about living, raising minimum wage, public jobs programs, good, well-funded public schools, and affordable housing, getting money out of politics. You know, all those things are extremely popular. 70, 80 percent of Americans support many of those policies. But why don't we talk about them? Why is that not the overarching narrative that Democratic politicians are engaged in? I think that's a failing of the party. And I think Biden, the president, has actually been able to craft an important narrative around that. The challenge is, however, that the affordability crisis has not been fully addressed because of the failure to pass, build back better. So it's harder to make that push when a lot of his agenda did not ultimately go through. But I think his rhetoric around centering working people, making sure that corporations pay their fair share, that we stand with workers on strike for justice and dignity, all those things are ideas that, frankly, I've never been talked about by a Democratic president in 50 years. So I think that is an important consequential development that should be acknowledged. Even the ideas, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, the president going and walking the picket line with the UAW workers, that is a remarkable development in American political life that I think we should not shy away from acknowledging. So in these last 15 minutes or so, I want to really focus on the book because I really want this to be a book that, and I'll just say a quick personal note, most of my work focuses in the foreign policy space. I suspect I'm quite a bit more hawkish on a variety of foreign policy questions than you are. But I do think as I learn more about FDR's presidency, the more him building the American

Arsenal of Democracy, I host a podcast called Arsenal of Democracy, I actually don't think you could separate America's role in World War II from America's role with the New Deal. I actually think these are an industry that we tied together. And the separation thereof, the book that you're basically taking, my take from the book here is I can talk about how we need to have a 300 ship Navy to my lungs give out. I really seriously believe that. But if at the same time, I don't also focus on these issues of poverty, I think there's actually something deeply missing from that picture. So that was just a real positive reaction I had to your book. So let me give the quick negative then. And it's not even a negative, it's more like a frustration I think readers may experience. Let's talk about personal responsibility for a second. Because you and I are of similar age cohorts. So I would bet money we went through a similar experience during our upper middle class high school like AP Gov experience where it talks about the 1980s. And it says, you know, in the 1980s, you know, Ronald Reagan is the president, he talks about the welfare queen, it turns out she didn't actually exist. And it turns out that a lot of the language around personal responsibility, actually, these are really dog whistles about black people, Richard Nixon and Richard Nixon staff, they said all these horrible things like this, this, this and that, I will acknowledge that that's all true. It's very well documented. But that said, in the book, you are documenting so many examples of just bad individualized decision making. Like there's this really harrowing piece towards the end where one of the main characters, Ryan, his not mother-in-law

because he's not married to the woman who has his baby, but the mother of his, the mother of his baby mama, I'm just gonna keep it simple there. She slaps them across the face when they're getting in an argument. And then later, Bianca, the mother of his child, like hits him across the

face during the conversation. I just found myself and throughout the book, like you're making reference to the fact that we need to focus on root causes, we need to focus on the structural realities. And I actually agree with that. But I just found myself so fresh that I wanted to shake them and just be like, fucking stop. Right. And I think that there's something like deeply American about that. And that gets to the awkward politics of individual responsibility and taking charge of oneself and behaving properly. So that's just my visual. This isn't Marshall, the podcaster speaking. This is Marshall, the reader. Can you speak to that? And what's in your not, you don't make yourself a part of the book at all. So like, I'm not saying like, why don't you just grab them and tell them to get their lives because that's not the book. So I'm asking you now, like, help me just like wrestle with this feeling because I know that it's easy as hell for me to sit here as like upper middle class podcaster who came from a PhD lawyer background to say, like, get your stuff together. Because frankly, my stuff wasn't together in my like early 20s. And I got a million different chances to fix things. So I understand that, but I still have something that this early is saying any political message that's telling me I can't talk about personal responsibility. There's just something wrong about that. Sure. Yeah. No, it's, you know, throughout the book, I describe poor decisions by either the main characters or other people in their lives. And, you know, sometimes it's simple or kind of cut and dried as engaging in fights, as you point out. And that is, you know, those are, you know, I think that is born out of a number of things. I think obviously just bad decisions being made. I also think it is a product of living in a very violent neighborhood. I think when you're living, when you're living among a neighborhood where there's constant fear and risk of victimization, that means that many of your interactions are going to be defined by violence, whether you like it or not. And that doesn't, that's not trying to, you know, take the people off the hook for their individual actions. And we can, we can talk about that. But I think it's important to contextualize how many of these decisions or actions are happening within a very particular environment where, where, you know, this is, you know, in Philadelphia, it is a city that has experienced some of the highest levels of homicides per capita of any large city in America. In last year, last school year alone, 179 Philadelphia students were shot, 179 students alone, just in one year were shot. And, and then you add to that in the Kensington neighborhood where it spent time. The babies are expected to live to the age of 71, 17 fewer years than the babies born just four miles away in the White Affluent Society Hill, very high levels of poverty, the largest open air drug market on the East Coast. I mean, just bring it all together. And that is going to cloud and influence people decision making and their behaviors. And so I try to explain that, yes, you know, and it was important for me to, you know, it's easy as a progressive and a, as a social Democrat to leave out and omit some of those stories, because it doesn't, it doesn't fall, it doesn't fit well into a larger narrative necessarily. But I thought it was important just to put that in there and keep them in there because that's, it's important to depict people's lives in the most accurate way possible. As a journalist, it was important to do that. But then at the same time, I provide, I marry that agency, those individual experiences and struggles with the social structure and the history to help not fully explain, but to partially and largely explain why those conditions exist and they don't exist in a vacuum. And so I think the example that you presented in other examples in the book, I would go as far to say that I don't know if they would exist or be as so extreme if you didn't have the level of deprivation

and violence that exists in the neighborhood. And I think, you know, I would also just comment on the criminal justice policies as well. You know, I strongly recognize that, that there needs to be sanctions and some level of punishment when people engage in, in egregiously violent activities. And so, but, but at the same time, I would also acknowledge that as, as Jill Leoby and other scholars have pointed out, black communities and black and brown communities have been both underpoliced as well as overpoliced. Overpoliced for more trivial quality of life offenses and underpoliced for the more violent offenses that are, that go unsolved. It is unacceptable to me that in a civilized society that 30, 20, 30% of homicides, only 20, 30% of homicides are going solved in, in Philadelphia and other major cities. That's unacceptable that people cannot, cannot get justice for their loved ones being raped, assaulted and murdered in, in their neighborhoods. That's just, that is a failure of the state to provide for each and every human being.

And so, you know, I, I, I think it's important to think about root causes. Obviously, there's a role of the criminal justice system to make sure that people who are engaging in repeated violent offenses are, are not going to be allowed to wander the streets.

And then also to recognize that a lot of these conditions have a mental health component as well. That there's just not a sufficient or even an adequate mental health system in this country that people are, people who are dealing with homelessness and addiction and other social ills or just fall through the cracks and, and are living in great desperation on, on the streets of this country. I mean, you can go to many blocks of Kensington and you will find 10 cities concentrated on various corners where people have been living months and even years on, on the streets with no level of care or treatment. That is a failure of the state.

And we can talk about personal responsibility. And yes, people are responsible for, for many of the things that happen in their life. But I think there's also a obligation and responsibility of the state to ensure that there are enough treatment beds available, that there are places where people don't have to worry about overdosing and can be in the safe care of a health professional. Those are things I think that are the responsibility of the state along with individual responsibilities. So for these last two questions, a question that just maybe you address this in the paperback version. And maybe you said this specifically and I missed it. What do the recipients of aid owe to the broader society that's giving them aid? The reason why I bring that up is you had a semi disparaging comment about the implementation of work requirements when it came to welfare policies, especially in the 1990s. And there's actually a variety of like very poorly thought out and unfair implementation that's happening at the state level. So like, let's put that aside and just focus on the requirements themselves. Because I do know, I've had, you know, Oren Cass on the podcast, like something that Oren Cass is one of the leading conservatives who engages with this topic is very much like, oh no, like we conservatives, we believe in work requirements, we believe in asking things of people. And I guess my concern is sometimes it, because I'm asking this from a political feasibility perspective, I don't think it's politically, what was politically unfeasible about the 1980s and 1990s social welfare policy, was it seemed to the public at large that there were no expectations and nothing was being asked of the people who were receiving things. And once

again, there's a really long band of what that could actually look like. But I'm curious how you would think about that. Well, so there's some great scholars and researchers who in the

80s and 90s who examined the social welfare system and particularly aid to families with dependent children. And there's one famous study that found that most people who were on welfare were on welfare for various spells of time. They would go in and off of welfare during times of economic hardship and then they would leave it when they had more security. A minority did linger for a longer period of time. And I think that was a challenge and problem. I would also argue that just some of the provisions of AFDC actually prevented the formation of two parent households, even just the idea of a man in the house rule on how women had to constantly hide their boyfriends and husbands and loved ones because they would lose welfare benefits as a result of that. That was a challenge. I also think there were also challenges with the fact that we didn't have a public employment program similar to one that Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Coretta Scott King and other folks advocated for so that people could have a job if they wanted to. There was an issue of spatial mismatch. We paused there real quick. Do you have 10 minutes? Sure. I just want to ask why we generous if you're time. What are the problems?

Okay. So what's paused there in the general Patrick Moynihan thing? Because that is so fascinating because there's no doubt you know. And Listerine might not be aware. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, before he was the senator of New York, he worked in sociology space. He was in the Nixon administration, but he wrote a famous report about the state of the black family, the collapse of the black family unit. And conservatives will obviously talk a lot about what how prescient this was. And the most prescient was he wasn't just focusing on black people. He was saying, hey, as a whole, there's a broader family unit issue that we're going to run into. We could debate the specifics, but the next 50 years track that. But what conservatives do not talk about is the full employment job aspect response to that. So can you talk because I didn't know that. So I'd love for you just to like talk about that because that's a really interesting kind of merging. This is why this is why Moynihan is like an interesting political figure because he's genuinely like a neoconservative. He's genuinely like this weird mix of different instincts. But yeah, so speak to that please. No, absolutely. I mean, I have just been profoundly influenced by Moynihan. I mean, the report that you talked about was the famous Moynihan

report on the black family. But unfortunately, a lot of his policy prescriptions were left out, were entirely left out of the report. It was mostly an analysis or evaluation of the plight of African-American families, the rise of single parent households and welfare dependency and crime and other issues. It left out entirely the fact that he was on the record one of the strongest champions of a public jobs program, a full employment economy. It was something that he and the labor secretary, Wurz, had pushed for in the early days of the war on poverty. You know, they essentially argue that we can't educate. We can't teach our way out of poverty. We have to provide people with decent public employment that pays a living wage. And you know, obviously there was some, some of their orientation was about this kind of matriarch, this patriarchal family structure where the man would go to work and the woman would stay home. But at the very least, I think what was really important was that they believed that we should invest in those jobs programs, as well as in other types of income programs to provide people with a level of income, whether it was not necessarily a basic income for everybody, but for families as well. So Moynihan, you know, he has a fascinating trajectory and that he was instrumental in something during the Nixon administration called a family allowance plan, which would have

provided essentially a basic, a minimum basic income for families. And you know, ultimately did not pass and pass Congress. But it was an example of one of the most robust social welfare policies. And you know, the unfortunate thing as well was that the left, I think had a play in its, in the demise of that program, because they said it wasn't enough. And so we're not going to support it. And then on the childcare program as well, there was a major effort to provide universal childcare in the 1970s under Nixon. And then obviously Nixon on the advice that had Buchanan and other conservative religious conservatives who were talking about family values and nutritional family structure, they convinced him to oppose that piece of legislation. But Moynihan had an enormous role to play in, you know, as he held many neoconservative ideas and theories about crime and other issues, had a very social democratic core when it came to core economic issues. And that is something I am very influenced by and indebted to his work and scholarship.

Yeah, it's so interesting. So the last question I want to ask you, because you have a lot of expertise in the education field, which you haven't spoken as much about, I'd love to just understand where you think we are in the education policy debate, because as you could probably tell

and listeners definitely know, I like to think in terms of timelines. So if it's 1980, the famous nation at risk report comes out in 1983, like that, that we've kind of hit the two reports that people are probably going to know, like nation at risk comes out, says we think everything's hunky-dory, schools is actually not hunky-dory, that really girds discussion for the next decade or so. In the 90s, you have Clintonian third-way politics, you're talking about school uniforms, you're talking about like policies kind of like in that direction. And then in the 2000s, you have the initial consensus of No Child Left Behind, it's famously Ted Kennedy, and George W. Bush who do that. In the Obama administration, you have the era of like race to the top. So it's kind of recognizing like, okay, like, we definitely think that No Child Left Behind went a little too far, but like there's definitely still something there in terms of like using the power of the federal government to sort of interject money into the school system to enact change. And that way, there's a debate within Democratic Party about like charter schools and reform. Initially, the charter reformers, quote unquote, because I know it's like a loaded term to say, if you're like looking at that debate, they're basically winning. The teachers means take a bunch of hits, but because the results don't really track with the hype, a lot of the energy seems to go away. And then you have like a lot of the interest on that, interest on that issue in the center of life kind of dissipates. For example, Cory Booker, before he's a senator, is a big charter school guy. He's now a senator, the party's moved on, he's kind of moved on from that part of his legacy. Tell me if any part of that conventional, like popular history is like incorrect or mischaracterized, but if it's directionally true, which I think it is, where are we now? Because it really feels like we're in this weird state where basically everyone recognizes the status quo isn't working, but everyone got their shot at trying their big Hail Mary. This is the thing. We tried the uniforms, we tried No Child Left Behind, we tried Zoom school. Where are we right now? No, it was a really succinct analysis. I would just add that when Betsy DeVos became Secretary of Education, the bipartisan consensus around privatization and school choice and busting up teachers unions dissipated because Democrats didn't want to be attached to the more vehemently right-wing record and agenda that Trump and DeVos were espousing.

I mean, we're in this unique moment. We've come out of the pandemic, of the school closure, battles, and fights. I think settled down remarkably so. I think the debate around charters versus traditional public schools has largely winnowed down. I think the Democratic Party, at least on the federal government level, the president has been very supportive of public education of community schools, of teachers unions. I think the party has recognized the important role that they play as well as building up the public sector. I mean, just recently, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona criticized a plan in Pennsylvania to provide private school vouchers. I think there's, at least from the Biden administration, there's a recognition that we're not going to wade into many of these fights that publicly we might make a statement or two, but we're going to mostly focus on our economic agenda and we're going to let the school wars play themselves out at the local and the state level. That's really where it's happened. Obviously, the more notable examples are in Florida with Governor Ron DeSantis and his work to dismantle New College of Florida and the road tenure protections and other academic freedoms. I think, to me, the great challenge in crisis is in the fact that you are seeing a massive expansion of vouchers at the state level, as well as even in Philadelphia and other places, you are still seeing the ongoing erosion of public education. In Philadelphia alone, 40% of kids, nearly 40% of kids are attending charters or cyber charter schools. That is a massive growth in enrollment since the 1990s when they first came onto the scene. That worries me because you're seeing that in New Orleans, there are no traditional public schools left. It is an entirely old charter district, Detroit, Los Angeles, Chicago, and you have seen a crop of mayors like Brandon Johnson in Chicago and other places push back against the ongoing charter expansion. My position on charters is very nuanced, which is that I think there are some wonderful, equitable student-centered charter schools out there. They should be widely adopted and emulated by the social school system, but they are not a panacea for educational woes. I think we should go back to the original vision of charters, which were these great experiments in innovation and new types of pedagogy where the best practices would then be brought into the larger public system for everyone to enjoy. I think that has been co-opted by billionaires and some of these corporate reformers and in Wall Street types as a way to delegitimize and privatize the public schools. I'm a big believer and we can still have charters, but they should be operating in a very different capacity than they currently are. The best idea should be brought into the public system so that our schools are more equitable, more humane, more child-centered, and more responsive to the needs of students and teachers. I'll close with this. I said this to a prominent figure in the public education movement a few weeks ago, but the more you read about the disastrous impact of Zoom school and the lack of reopening on children, the more I'm just flummoxed that the public school side of these debates wasn't able to better leverage that into just a battering ram for the next decade. Oh, you thought our schools weren't good and we needed to do all of that. Actually, we see the impact when these schools aren't functioning. Actually, we ran the impact of can we digitize it? It actually doesn't work. Think of so many of these and this comes through in your book. I'd never really thought about the impact. I'll put it this way. There's a portion of your book that's talking about the closing of a local school. The part of me that remembers no child left behind debates from the 2000s is just thinking, look, if the school is failing, there does have to be accountability. I don't know. Are they basically saying if this thing

continues to be a dropout factory forever, we're just going to let it go forever, which I think is a fair instinct. The way this comes through in your book is this isn't just a school. This is a place. It's an institution. It's a firm part of the neighborhood and any discussion. Once again, why are the child poverty intervention so important because the schools were closed so people couldn't get food? That's where a lot of these kids are actually getting food. I just think the failure to fear of awkward conversations around teachers' unions causing schools to be closed a little too long caused the public school movement to drop the easiest win of the decade when it comes to these arguments. You don't have to give me a take on that, but that's just my personal. That's my Occam's race. That must be what's happening here, because it's just so obvious. Man, look at the states where schools opened up early. Our schools do such a good job. This is the easiest story ever, and it's just sort of shocking to me that it's not being kind of waved around as a flag. I would just comment. I wrote a piece for The Nation magazine in the summer of 2021 where I argued that we can safely reopen schools in the form of outdoor experiential learning. There shouldn't just be remote learning. We should tap into the power of cities and urban neighborhoods as well as the entire landscape of public institutions, parks, and libraries, and other facilities for children to be educated in, that we didn't have to simply rely on remote education. The kids that attended Alcantro de Yantes, this alternative school which I featured in the book, they were enormously harmed by remote education. They did not show up. A lot of them just completely tuned out and were disengaged. There were some incredible educators who held classes in community parks and in gardens where kids would come and congregate in the afternoon and evening hours. One teacher would go door by door to each of his students so that you would tutor them individually in the evenings. There was a lot that I think we could have done better. Obviously, a lot of this we could not have prepared for in the spring of 2020, but there was much more that I think schools could have done to allow some form of in-person learning in outdoor settings, especially when we knew that the virus wasn't as transmissible outside as it was indoors. I think that conversation was important to be had, but I think as you also pointed out, it's important to acknowledge the critical function that schools play as anchors of the community where many kids will not be fed if they did not come to school. That is the one place they go to get a free breakfast and lunch and a snack. It is one of the few stable sanctuaries of their lives. Obviously, the incredible pain and death and suffering that it invoked, but also on the level of education that the fact that we just abandoned millions of children and they had no safe place to be during the day, that was also a travesty in and of itself. I think that is a sobering but excellent place to end. Thank you so much for joining me on The Realignment. Thank you so much. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like this sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year, or \$500 for lifetime membership rates. See you all next time.