

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Are We In A Pre-War Era?

Hi guys, it's Barry with a really exciting announcement for you.
As listeners of the show will know, one of the reasons that this exists in the first place is to embody and promote honest, frank conversations and good faith debates, both of which feel increasingly rare in our polarized country.
That is why I'm so excited to announce that the Free Press, along with FIRE, the nation's leading defender of free speech rights, are hosting a live debate on a very sexy and contentious subject on Wednesday, September 13th at 7 p.m. at the historic Ace Theatre in downtown Los Angeles.
The proposition? The sexual revolution has failed.
Arguing for the proposition is co-host of the podcast Redscare, Anacachian, and author of the case against the sexual revolution, Louise Perry.
They're going to be facing off against musician and producer Grimes, and writer and co-host of the podcast A Special Place in Hell, Sarah Hader.
I'm going to be the moderator and I couldn't be more excited.
This is going to be an amazing night.
It's a chance to meet other people in the real world who also like thinking for themselves and who listen to this show.
You can get your tickets now by going to [thefp.com backslash debates](https://thefp.com/backslash/debates).
Again, that's [thefp.com slash debates](https://thefp.com/slash/debates).
I can't wait to meet some of you guys in person.
And now, here's the show.
I'm Barry Weiss, and this is Honestly.
A few weeks ago, I was in a dinner party, and I found myself in conversation with two hyper-educated, super-smart genseers. These are kids who didn't know a world before the internet, didn't know American foreign policy before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. We spent a lot of time talking about things like Lana Del Rey and succession, but then somehow the conversation pivoted to the more contentious topic of American foreign policy.
Now, these two guys had really different politics. One was a centrist Democrat, the other was something of a Marxist. And yet when we came to the subject of China and what America ought to do in a hypothetical scenario in which China invades Taiwan, there was absolutely no daylight between them. They both shrugged when I laid out the scenario, and they said something to the effect of, we should probably do nothing at all.
And then they went back to eating their pasta while my jaw remained on the floor. Their assumptions about America's role in the world, and frankly about our civilization more broadly, were just a world away from mine. I still believe, despite all of our mistakes, that the world is better and safer where America is the uncontested world power, that it is a very dangerous thing when that power is contested by countries like China. But those Gen Zers I was chatting with think, what am I talking about?

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American hegemony? We've already lost.

And I realized if I said the words American dream to them,
they probably would have burst out laughing.

Now it's easy to roll your eyes at these kids because by any objective measure,
they have everything, not just freedom from want,
but rights afforded to them that were unthinkable a few generations ago,
and that remain unthinkable in places like China.

The paradox of our present moment is that everything is getting better.

More than that, it's arguably the best time to be alive by almost any measure.

And yet so many people, especially so many young people,
are cynical and nihilistic.

And on face value, that doesn't seem to make any sense at all.

Why is that?

Why in an era of so much abundance and progress
do so many people feel so much despair?

The columnist and thinker Walter Russell Mead

is someone who I look to to help me make sense of the world.

So today I invited him on to help me make sense of that strange, strange paradox.

Walter is a fellow at the Hudson Institute.

He's also the global view columnist at the Wall Street Journal
and a professor at Bard College.

He's written numerous books on foreign policy,
including an excellent one he published last year.

It's about America and Israel's special relationship,
and it's titled The Ark of a Covenant.

We don't talk about it today because it would take up hours of conversation,
but if you haven't read this book, I highly recommend you order it.

On today's show, I ask Walter,

are things getting better or worse in America and around the world?

Is the American system fundamentally good and worth preserving?

Is there such a thing as too much progress?

Can progress itself be destructive?

And most importantly, why he believes that though we were born into a post-war era,
we are now definitively in a pre-war one.

How long will that last?

How can we live through a time in which he believes war is ultimately eminent?

Stay tuned. We'll be right back.

Hi, honestly, listeners.

I'm here to tell you about an alternative investing platform called Masterworks.

I know investing in finance can be overwhelming,
especially given our economic climate.

But there's one thing that will never go in the red,
and that is a painting from Picasso's Blue Period.

Masterworks is an exclusive community that invests in blue chip art.

They buy a piece of art, and then they file that work with the SEC.
It's almost like filing for an IPO.
You buy a share representing an investment in the art.
Then Masterworks holds the piece for three to 10 years,
and then when they sell it,
you get a prorated portion of the profit's minus fees.
Masterworks has sold \$45 million worth of art to date,
from artists like Andy Warhol, Banksy, and Monet.
Over 700,000 investors are using Masterworks to get in on the art market.
So go to masterworks.com slash honestly for priority access.
That's masterworks.com slash honestly.
You can also find important Regulation A disclosures at masterworks.com slash cd.
Walter Russell Mead, welcome to Honestly.
It's great to be here.
You wrote an article in Tablet recently.
It was called You're Not Destined to Live in Quiet Times.
And the article is sort of fundamentally about the paradox of progress.
Here's part of what you wrote.
Progress has done many things for us,
and few of us would exchange the dentistry, for example, of our time,
with that of even the recent past.
But progress turns out to be paradoxical.
Human ingenuity has made us much safer from natural calamities.
We can treat many diseases, predict storms, build dams,
both to prevent floods and to save water against drought,
and many other fine things.
Many fewer of us starve than in former times,
and billions of us today enjoy better living conditions
than our forebears dreamed possible.
Yet if we are safer from most natural catastrophes,
what we are more vulnerable than ever to are human-caused ones.
So what has actually made us better, you argue,
could be the very thing that sort of does us in.
Do I have that right?
Yeah, that it turns out that the greatest danger to human beings is not the natural world.
It's not the polar bears.
It's not the great white sharks and the tigers.
Actually, the biggest danger is us.
And the very technology that enables us to survive
or manage these natural catastrophes empowers us.
And so whether it's things that we might do deliberately,
like blowing ourselves up in a nuclear war,
whether it's things we might do through poor choices,
like contributing to climate change that becomes unmanageable,

or even if it's just the way that human society has become so complex that we don't know how to manage it, so that you could have a financial firestorm resulting from some securities trading where no one, not even the regulators, really knows how all the risks in this new complex world of derivatives and global trading and AI strategies in the markets, you could blow up world's financial markets and cause all kinds of problems. We thought for the years of the Enlightenment that we were escaping all of that, that we were moving toward a world of security and abundance. And yeah, we've got pretty much abundance, but it turns out there isn't any security there. You make the argument that progress is fundamentally good when it is sort of methodical and controlled, but you ask the very interesting question, can we overdose on progress? You ask this, can the rate of social, economic, cultural, and technological change drive a particular society into a political, psychological, and moral spiral of crisis and dysfunction? Do you feel like that's the moment we're facing right now? I think that's the danger that we're facing. I actually think that American society may not have exhausted our resources for adaptation and flexibility, but we're going to have to raise our game. In these essays, I keep referring to something called the Adams Curve, where Henry Adams, writing about 100 years ago, had looked at the power of the human race collectively. How much power could we produce? And he sees a hyperbola, a curve that starts very flat. And then around 1500, it starts to go up, and 1800, then it becomes almost vertical after 1900. And if you think about that as representing the slope of technological progress, and then you think, okay, what is the amount of technological progress that a given society can experience and still function? You can see that as that curve becomes steeper, you're going to have more societies encountering these kinds of problems where they're just confronted with conditions that they don't know how to manage or deal with. I think you can look around the world and see a fair amount of that going on today. I think one of the great debates of our time is the debate broadly between the Steven Pinkers of the world who say, look around, guys.

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Look at every stack.

Look at every piece of data.

As the Beatles would say, it's getting better all the time.

And sort of the Yuval Noah Harare's of the world

who say we're headed off a cliff if we haven't already tumbled over it.

What is your position?

Because it seems to me that you sort of fall somewhere in between.

Maybe I'm a both and kind of guy.

That it does seem to me that a lot of the arguments Pinker makes about our capabilities and what we're able to do and what we often do are not wrong.

But at the same time, as I look at the world, I don't see an absence of risk.

I don't see people getting better.

After World War II, which ends with Hiroshima and Nagasaki and you have the tyranny, the horrors of Nazism and of course the horrors of Stalinism and Maoism coming along as well, we wanted to draw a line between us and that and say, okay, those are the old days.

Those are the bad old days.

But we have learned we are in a different place.

And in some ways the health of this international world system that was preventing great power war and so that Germany and Japan were peacefully integrated into this affluent western liberal trading system.

And we were going to try to expand that when the Soviet Union collapsed.

The health of that system is sort of our psychological barrier.

We don't want to say actually with all the weapons we've got, with all the tensions we've got, we are no different from the people of 1935 or 1810 and whatever kinds of things they did we could do.

And I happen to think that's true.

I don't think human nature has been revolutionized by technology.

It's been empowered.

And so we still have the opportunity to do wonderful things that no one has ever done.

But we also have absolutely the ability and the risk to sort of plunge the world and do an abyss that it's never seen.

Your contention, and I think this is right, is that the revolution that we're living through is one that is more vast, faster, and arguably more world changing than the Neolithic revolution or the Industrial Revolution.

Here's how you put it in a recent piece.

Increasingly, especially with advances in genetics and the science of the brain coming so quickly, it looks as if we are entering an age of permanent revolution in which radical technological and social changes cascade across the world largely nonstop.

For people in our time, rapid and accelerating change is the norm.

We hardly know anymore what stability feels like.

In other words, the revolution that we're living through might be invisible to many of us, but it's happening inside of us and all around us all the time.

And reading that in those sentences felt very, very true to me, but also was very unsettling

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because while the current revolution, at least so far, may seem invisible, history tells us that you don't get a revolution without tremendous violence and bloodshed. So is that what's around the bend, Walter, or is it already bloody and we're just not seeing it yet? Well, I think there are signs of the violence of the 21st century. You can see it in places like Ethiopia and Sudan, Syria, where societies that had been reasonably stable are plunging into the kind of ethnic and sectarian wars that say we saw in the Balkans in the 19th century, 20th century in Europe. And I think we can see in the rising international tensions. What we're now seeing, for example, in Asia is an international arms race in conditions of zero strategic trust. This is something that most students of international relations would tell you is the kind of situation that while it doesn't inevitably produce war, war is more likely when this is happening. Obviously with Putin and Ukraine, with what Iran seems to be cooking up at various times in the Middle East, the world is not getting more stable. I would say it or somewhere around 2014, it seems to me we left a post-war era where international politics is about dealing with the leftover problems of the last great conflict and we moved into a pre-war era where international politics starts dealing with problems that if you don't solve them, if you don't manage them well, they could spark the next great international conflict. And what are the characteristics of a pre-war era? At home especially is what I'm interested in, but abroad as well. Well, at home it becomes one of rising alarm. And I would say that if you look at polls, Americans are getting more worried about the international scene. Some have focused on Russia, Ukraine, but if you look at perceptions of China, you see a really marked bipartisan move toward a much greater sense of threat when it comes to the future of U.S.-Chinese relations. So that would be one piece of it. And you notice that you have a liberal democratic administration is steadily increasing the defense budget. And in the last congressional debt ceiling negotiations, the defense budget is increasing even as discretionary domestic programs are not. So we're seeing a change in American political psychology. Your contention is that there can only be peace abroad when America is on strong, stable footing at home. In other words, this sort of hardline distinction that many people make between domestic affairs or domestic policy and foreign affairs or foreign policy isn't really true, that when we're weak at home and wobbly at home, that leaks out to the world beyond our borders. Would you say that's fair characterization? That's certainly part of what I think, yeah. So given that we're in this time of tremendous uncertainty at home, it shouldn't surprise us then that things around the world also seem uncertain.

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And I want to talk about what that uncertainty, what that wobbliness looks like first here at home.

And then I want you to sort of take us on a tour of what it looks like around the world.

So let's start with sort of the state of our politics here at home.

One of the things that sort of become conventional wisdom is that America is more polarized than ever before.

That people admit to not wanting to hire people that voted for Trump.

The idea of dating someone across political lines is not the money people.

So you're a historian.

Are things actually worse when it comes to polarization that they have been before?

Because we did live through a civil war in this country.

And sometimes I wonder if those of us warning about polarization are being hyperbolic, myself included.

Well, even I don't remember the civil war.

But I do remember the 60s and 70s quite well, at least parts of them.

And I think in some ways people were as bitter or more bitter now.

Remember that with the Vietnam War, there was the draft so that 18-year-old boys were facing sort of existential choices.

Picture how that makes teenagers feel, how that changes the culture.

You had the civil rights movement, the beginning of feminism, and the gay rights movement all sort of churning around.

I actually think in many ways the Zoomers and the Boomers are karmic twins.

Large generations that think they are breaking ground.

Total distrust for older people.

Total belief that they're going to revolutionize everything.

I know it drives Zoomers crazy, but we think you're cute.

It reminds us of our own youth.

So, but I think the polarization in some ways was actually worse.

One of the things that's different now is that politics is steadily becoming more of a religion for more people.

And this, I think, is a result of both the rapidity of change that we're going through, which makes people uncertain and looking for framework to make sense of it.

But it's also this notion now in politics, people will say, look, if the other side wins, we won't take the measures that are needed to stop climate change, and then we're all going to die.

Politics is not about, well, really your policies would make things slightly worse, and therefore I kind of would like to go in another direction.

It's, you're going to kill the planet.

And then on the other side, there's this sense that the social changes that are happening, you're going to destroy the family, you're going to destroy the fundamental basis of human society.

And it's not because people are bad necessarily, or that our political leadership is particularly weak, it's that actually the stakes in the world are so great that we live in an age in which the apocalypse is no longer a kind of a religious idea that only divine power can bring about.

The apocalypse is something that human politics could bring about.

Nuclear war, climate change, AI taking over everything.

And so it's when politics has that kind of power to it, then the sorts of things that used to happen in religious and sectarian wars and the deep divides that appear, I don't want to be married to someone who's trying to kill the planet, or whatever it might be, this is real.

Another major feature I see in American life right now, which is just the total collapse in trust, especially in our institutions, right? You can pick your area. For everyone, it's different. For some people, it's schools, for other people, it's the justice system, academia, medicine, the law. Diagnose this for me. Why are Americans so disenchanted and distrustful

of organizations and institutions that, for my parents' generation, seemed not just deserving of that trust, but also that it was just taken as a basic feature of life, like gravity, that would sort of always be that way. Why have we lost so much trust in our institutions?

Well, one thing to start with is that that period of your parents and grandparents, or my peers, really, was an unusual period in American history. General Marshall and the army won World War II. The New Deal, at least as people understood it, stopped the depression. Science stopped polio. Medicine was working. So there was this tremendous feeling of trust in sort of upper middle class, scientifically educated, professional people and the institutions in which they worked. But we shouldn't generalize too much. I mean, a lot of black people in the United States had always looked at the system with a lot of deserved skepticism. So to some degree, what you had was a public dialogue that excluded certain voices of distrust.

But there was this historical moment. You go back to the 19th century, there was a lot more paranoia. Polarization was pretty deep. Political loyalties were more tribal in some ways than they are now. But 20th century industrial society in the United States had sort of three main classes in society. You had first the plutocrats, and not many of us met many of them. And they were pretty careful to keep a low profile. They drove Volvos, they weren't too showy. Then you had the upper middle class, those professionals. And then you had the masses. And the upper middle class professionals coming out of the progressive era, their idea was, look, the people are crazy. They drink too much. We should do prohibition. They believe stupid things, so we should teach them evolution. They breed too much, so we should have eugenics. So part of their agenda is controlling the people in the name of enlightenment. But the other part of their agenda is controlling the plutocrats, because the rich left to themselves will become so greedy and so powerful that the masses will then rise up. And it'll be awful. It'll be like the French Revolution. So we are the enlightened, wise, upper middle class managers, administrators,

foundation executives, and all of these people, university professors, New York Times reporters. And we're going to repress the bad in both. And that's pretty much what probably for both you and me, the majority of our friends are in that zone. Very much. Yep. And there are problems with it. One of them is that when this idea really took hold, the average American had an eighth grade or less education. So if you were an immigrant family coming in to the tenements and you don't speak English, basically the teacher knows things that you don't. And your job as a parent isn't really to teach your kid how America works. It's to make sure they do what the school tells them to do, because it's the experts who know. And in the same way, my grandfather was a doctor in a small town

in South Carolina. And there was no Dr. Google that could give you a second opinion. Dr. Mead

was the person who had the best answers available. And maybe he was wrong sometimes, but he knew

more than you did. But you didn't know. Right. Right. And so there was this respect for authority based on the reality that authority had a monopoly of knowledge that you didn't have.

That sense has been steadily eroding. And part because just more people have a good education. There are a lot of people out there that have a better education than the average elementary school teacher in the United States. And they see no reason why they should defer to the teacher. There are a lot of people who, when they hear from their doctor, go immediately to Google and find out seven different theories, et cetera. And of course, the enlightened upper middle class in this age of COVID and sudden new problems that no one understands, we get a lot of things wrong.

And yet we continue to believe kind of deeply and instinctively that without our mediating efforts in lightening the lower orders and restraining the upper orders, right, without that functions, there can be no good society. So we continue plugging away in what we are convinced is the only sensible way for society to work, but others are losing trust.

I want to pick up on what you said, Walter, about respect for authority. Right. Another feature of our current moment, I would say, in America is the lack of leadership, period.

One of the things that you've written really brilliantly about when you're talking about sort of the failures of American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War is this consensus that all of the sort of experts in the pointy heads of that generation had this sense that history was over and that freedom of people, freedom of markets was an unstoppable force.

And basically, they were wrong, deeply, deeply wrong about that core assumption.

And it was a generational failure of them to sort of misunderstand that.

You say that a similar generational failure has happened here at home, though it has perhaps been less obvious than the foreign policy failure.

Can you diagnose that for us? There's several elements to it, but maybe we could take race relations as sort of a key area of this, where 60 years after the civil rights movement and the passing of anti-discrimination laws, the beginning of affirmative action, the wealth gap between black and white households is greater than ever. The social problems in the inner city are worse than ever. Whether you're a liberal or conservative, you look at the last 50, 60 years of racial policy and it didn't achieve what people said it was going to achieve.

I think you can make some similar arguments about what higher education was going to do, expansion of college to everybody. In a sense, it's devalued the college degree rather than giving everyone the magic of what a college degree, say, meant in 1960, when it sort of propelled you into a place.

I think the other thing you could mention is globalization, or at least for a lot of people in this country, that seems like an economic policy that has not redounded to their benefit.

No, absolutely. People would hear the establishment say in the 1990s, free trade with China will make China democratic and Americans rich. People see, well, that hasn't happened. Or NAFTA, free trade with Mexico, that was going to consolidate democracy in Mexico, stop illegal immigration because of all the wonderful jobs that would be created in Mexico, and would also raise American standards of living. People just look at this and all of these things that they were told would happen aren't happening.

And there's been no reckoning, it feels like. It feels like the people that created that world

and created the successes but also the profound failures of that world are still in charge. I think one of the things that medical advances do is that it keeps us old geezers going a lot longer. And so Nancy Pelosi remains an incredibly formidable politician. She's not speaker anymore, but in the old days, for example, in universities, they had compulsory retirement age, usually about 65. So tenure was something you would get around 40, and at 65 you had to give it up. Why would you give it up? So you have people teaching into their 80s. And if you're having trouble getting up the stairs to your classroom under the ADA, the university has to fix it so you can continue to hobble up to wherever you're going. Now, as a septuagenarian, I find that really wonderful and liberating. But the truth is, if you are 23, 24, 25, or 35, you're looking at a very long slog before you're making some of the same kinds of decisions. We delayed adulthood in this society. We keep people in school far too long, which is a very artificial and sort of infantilizing environment in many ways, so that people are no longer feel able to make big life decisions like choosing a marriage partner or something until 30 or 35. And this is not actually the way people were meant by nature to live. And so you have all these young people making no real decisions and unable to, not economically self-sustaining, feeling also emotionally still in a process of formation over this incredibly prolonged adolescence. And yet, you know, have all the instincts, the talent, and the sort of intellectual activity of people like Alexander Hamilton, who were national leaders in their 20s. I look at the sort of scope of these failures, right, of our institutions that have lost our trust, of leaders that aren't stepping aside or aren't sort of meeting our moment. I look at the lack of respect for their authority. My mind tumbles toward the night of 2016, where I began the night utterly convinced that Hillary Clinton was going to win the election, and like many hysterical people across the country, ended it sobbing into my pillow at five in the morning or whatever time that was when Trump got on the stage. And at the time I couldn't have seen this, now I think I do, you know, that was the beginning of a movement that is much bigger than Trump, namely a populist movement. We have Trump polling at 50% among likely GOP primary voters and is unconvincing as his sort of golden toilet, high rise in Manhattan populism is to many of us, clearly it's resonated with a lot of Americans. I want to ask you if you think that the populist wave is just beginning to build. And I also want to ask you what lessons history teaches us about populism itself. And I don't think this is just because I'm a Jew, but I think that it might give me a special instinct for it, that I feel scared of populism. I feel a little bit like it's releasing a genie from a bottle. You know, I guess I would start by saying for Jews and other minorities to be nervous when populism gets going is not a foolish thing to feel. People forget it now, but if you look at say William Jennings Bryan's famous cross of gold speech, it's actually an anti-Semitic dog whistle thou shalt not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold you international bankers. You know, there is this kind of alienation and anger and hunt for scapegoats that happens. But you know, is this the beginning? There's a sense of which populism, today's populism is simply the latest stage in the most powerful movement in humanity over the last 200 years. Nationalism, in a way, beginning in Europe, breaking up, you know, the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, you know, sort of, I want to be ruled by people like me. I don't want to be ruled by well-trained, well-credentialed people who are not like me. And in some ways, that's what

the populist movement in the US, but also in many other countries around the world, is this, that the elites, I don't recognize people like myself. I don't want an elite that isn't like me. So I think that's a real thing. Do you see Trump as the beginning of a broader wave that's building? Do you see RFK as part of that same conversation or those separate phenomena

to you? Well, I look back at 2016, if you add up the Bernie Sanders vote in the Democratic primaries and you add up the Trump vote, you get a significant majority of Americans rejecting the establishment, right? They do it for different reasons and their proposed solutions don't have a lot to do with each other. So in this way, our situation is much more like, you know, Macron in France, where he survives because people don't agree on what would replace him.

But here at home, maybe the more important distinction in this moment isn't red or blue or Republican or Democrat because those categories are sort of, I don't really know what they mean anymore. It's more maybe establishment and anti-establishment or status quo versus revolutionary. Part of what has happened, I think generically in the West, certainly here, is something that Karl Marx, you know, didn't think was possible, which is that capitalism has survived the industrial proletariat. That is to say, between the outsourcing and the automation of manufacturing, while you still have people in the United States who are working people, Marx's idea of the industrial proletariat is not just that they're poor, because they've always been more poor people than rich people. And the poor people, generally speaking, haven't been able to take things over very effectively. But Marx saw in the industrial proletariat special characteristics, they work together in large factories, which built habits of cooperation and institutions and brought leaders to the fore. And because their workplaces were so important to the economy that if the steel workers and the coal workers and the railroad workers, you know, went on strike, you bring everything to a halt. And then even though Marx's revolution usually didn't happen, that industrial working class provided a kind of a baseline for a politics of economic rationality. That is, both social democratic parties would say we want to make things better for the workers, and we're going to raise the minimum wage, we're going to increase benefits, make factory jobs safer, whatever, you know, a big list. And ultimately, the sort of capitalist parties had to say, well, you know, we want that too, but we think your methods are counterproductive.

And so you had a political competition organized in a very clear way around economic benefits to this working class. And this was the old left in America, the decline of the old left, the rise of the new identitarian left, the feminist left, the black left, the gay left, and so on and so on, is rooted in identity rather than in economic rationality, so to speak. And in the absence of that industrial working class engine driving a certain type of politics, what we are now seeing is identity coming to the fore on all left and right.

And a sense of common agenda is much harder to articulate in these conditions.

I don't think we can make sense of what is happening right now in American life without also looking to a subject you mentioned earlier in the conversation, which is the decline in religion. More than 50% of Americans no longer attend church, synagogue, mosque, house of worship. Roughly 80% of Americans say they no longer believe in God, which is down 10% from 2012. You've written about how religion fundamentally provides us with something that those fillers, whether it's politics or money or hedonism, whatever it is, cannot, right? Religion

is about sort of digging deeper. You write this about religion. It exists to enrich and to complicate rather than to simplify our understanding of the contemporary world.

How much, Walter, of our current uncertainty is tied to the decline in religion?

First of all, let's again get away from the false historicism of saying that the 1960s and 60s are typical of the American past. Most of American history was actually more like now than like those periods where religion was this kind of fiery force. You had lots of people, whether it was crystals or astrology or new cults coming in all the time. Yes, you had denominations, you had religious traditions, but many of the immigrants who came here were actually not very religious at all. One of the rabbis actually were urging Jews not to come to the United States because there was no way to live as a Jew here for much of the time, and many of the Russian Jews who came here were bitterly anti-clerical because of the experience of local religious leaders being kind of tied in with the czar in various ways. May God bless the czar and keep him far away from us. Yes, go on. So that idea that there is a kind of an idyllic past of quiet faithfulness now breaking down is really false. We are in something more like normal, and because there are no barriers to expression, people can say what's on it. Because we're all on social media, we can see what others are thinking and doing, so we may be a bit more aware of it. However, Abrahamic religion or monotheistic ethical religion, whatever you want to say, does bring stuff to the table that I think we need now and that a lot of us aren't getting enough of. What kind of stuff? Well, we live in this world of radical risk where I can't say in one of these articles, you know, the world is not a safe space. We should have trigger alerts in every delivery room because this is a scary, scary world, and I can't tell you that there won't be a nuclear war or that there won't be conditioned Venus runaway greenhouse. What I can't tell you these things or that AI won't wipe us out one way or another. And you need to hold your psychological balance in these conditions. It helps. You need an anchor. Yeah, it helps if you believe in something that's not only bigger than you, but bigger than the United States government, bigger than the whole human race. And you can say, well, that's an illusion. Well, that's, you know, people can feel that way.

But if you are blessed with faith in God, you have an anchor. And that's really important. I think it's important too on things like the meritocracy. You know, how many people do we know that basically sort of think people who are born and get higher SATs than other people are better than other people. And also then that not smarter people are less. And that down's babies are maybe a burden, for example, rather than something. So again, people can have these things without believing in God. I'm not trying to say that, but you believe in a God who made all human beings in his image. And my great nephew, Peter Joseph, who has Down syndrome is as much made in God's image as I am, and has as much right to walk the earth and be happy as I do. And furthermore, you know, is better than me in some ways, and maybe not as good in me and others,

but we are equal. And if I have extra talents, am I supposed to use them simply for my own joy and benefit and to create a privileged place around my own family? Or do I have a duty to go out there and do things? Are they given to me for a purpose that is greater than me?

After the break, Walter and I look beyond America's borders,

and Hugh explains how America fits into the changing world order. We'll be right back.

Let's widen the aperture and look beyond America's borders at sort of the global picture and

America's

place in it. Since taking office, President Biden has sort of framed world politics as a battle between democracy and autocracy. This isn't a new concept. Woodrow Wilson and FDR framed the world as

a battle between democracy and dictatorship. Reagan and Truman used similar language during the Cold War, but you've been critical of President Biden framing world politics in that way. Here's what you've written. Mr. Biden should remember that his global coalition is held together more by common interests and common sense than by common values, and he should never underestimate the

domestic and the international cost of overhyped, underthought democracy rhetoric.

Walter, what do you mean by that? Do you not believe that we're at a crossroads between democracy and autocracy, or is that that you're objecting to the sort of moral valence that he's putting over foreign policy? You know, I personally think democracy is better than autocracy, but I think if the center of gravity in world politics is moving from Europe, which is really where it was more or less during the Cold War, to the Indo-Pacific, we're actually going to be building very different kinds of coalitions. I mean, for example, the Philippines with President Marcos might not be a shining example of pure democracy, but it's a really good thing that he is offering us the use of some bases. And he's doing it not because he wants more lectures on democracy from President Biden, but because he's worried about China. And some of our allies, like Japan and Australia, in their democracies, Vietnam is not very democratic. It's run by the Vietnamese Communist Party for that matter, but it's kind of key to our foreign policy.

There are a lot of people who criticize the BJP and the Modi government in India on all kinds of human rights grounds. And yet it's very hard to imagine a U.S. strategy against China that avoids war that doesn't include India. Now, this is not the first time we would not have won World War II without the Soviet Union. So Stalin, who was a mass murderer on Hitler's scale, an enormously evil human being, was a necessary ally in that war. This is not the first time that there's a tension between our democratic rhetoric and what we must do. That was sort of covered over

at the time that a lot of the human rights people were kind of on the left and weren't looking too hard at Stalin's crimes and were sort of wishing them away to the extent that they could. So there was a kind of a collusion there. I don't think you can expect it in the Indo-Pacific. So that's part of it. But part of it too is that when we talk about democracy, it carries a certain kind of westernization edge to it. So India is a democracy, has elections, but I had a conversation with the foreign minister of India at one point and he said to me, listen, if your foreign policy involves helping us stand up to China, we're with you. But if you want to westernize the world, we don't want any part of that. So we have to be thinking in a much more nuanced way about what is our democracy agenda? What is our strategic agenda? Do we need a separation of church and state in our

foreign policy? What do you mean by that? Well, is American foreign policy fundamentally an attempt

to bring American values to the whole world? I would say that's the church. Whereas the state would be more, is it to protect our security and economic interests? And it's one of the great lessons of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that trying to conflate church and state is a horrible mistake. I would say this, you know, I look at the war in Afghanistan and 20 years of war and

there's never been in the history of humankind, never have so many people thought so hard about strategy and developed so many strategic plans for the war. And we did rural development, we did women's education, we were doing eradication of opium and teaching them other crops. I mean, you know, we had just this incredibly long list of things. We were funding little NGO groups and starting universities. You know, there was, I mean, nobody's ever conducted a war on this many complex levels. There was just one little piece missing, which was a strategy to actually win the war. You know, that tiny, tiny little thing, almost an afterthought, right? So I mean, yes, it was colossally stupid. That doesn't mean that these values are wrong, but it does mean that it's clear that we were not thinking intelligently about what was possible in Afghanistan, what were our priorities in Afghanistan. And in the end, what were the American people prepared to do in Afghanistan? You know, a president can't just make foreign policy up out of his hat. Like, you know, this is the dream world I would like to live in. And so this is what we're going to do. Yes. You have to bring America with you, or you can't do it. You said earlier in this conversation that we're in a pre-war era, which may be true in terms of world wars. But there's a hot war going on right now in Europe's border, and it's been going on for more than a year, and it doesn't look like it's ending anytime soon. When you think about problem areas in the world, how highly do you rank Russia's war against Ukraine? And I believe you are just sort of off the plane from Kiev. So I'd love to hear a bit about what you saw there.

You know, this is really a very significant war. And while Russia is not the greatest challenge, I think the Biden people have it right when they say that Russia is sort of a short-term problem, and China is the longer-term and far more complex and engaging issue to think about.

You know, it is sort of amazing to see what Putin has done here. He's basically, you look at Russian television, people are really calling for the annihilation of Ukraine, Ukrainians, the assassination of Lindsey Graham. I see is on the list, though there might be some Americans that would want to propose that idea. I don't know. But, you know, there's a kind of an evil there, kind of naked avowed, evil be thou my good, as Satan says in Paradise Lost. And, you know, it's the sort of thing we really haven't heard this frankly espoused since the 1940s. And it's horrific.

Walter, one of the things that shocks me is, to me, it's not a morally nuanced area. Like, Russia invaded Ukraine, Putin has made his evil ambitions incredibly plain and known, and yet so many smart people I know, whether they're coming from the left or the right, believe that essentially America should stay out of the war, that Ukraine in some sick way was like asking for, how do you make sense of that, especially on the political right?

Well, I guess first of all, I would say that there can be an evil, but it can also not be your job to deal with it. So one could recognize the evil of what Russia is doing, but argue that for prudential reasons, it really did not make sense for the United States to be engaged. So somebody like Elbridge Colby will say, basically everything we give to Ukraine is something we're not giving to Taiwan, and that's a greater and more urgent danger. The trouble with politics is it's very, very hard to go from a moral perception, however clear and compelling, to an actual to-do list. Right. I guess this is the separation in a way between church and state you were just talking about. I'm collapsing them. Sorry. Well, you know, it's very human to want to do that. But again, I think you do need to think strategically. I happen to think that supporting Ukraine is in our strategic interest. Make that case to me. By the way, I wouldn't have made it if Ukraine had just sort of collapsed at the beginning. What is clear is that Ukraine exists as a nation.

They are fighting. Yes, we're helping them, but we're not dying. And I've talked to people, I talked to some of the survivors of the battle in Mariupol in the Azov steel plant who then went off and were prisoners in Russia. You know, I've talked to people who've really paid a price and all kinds of people who've given up cushy jobs to go work in the army for \$500 a month and take on all kinds of risks. They mean it and they're determined. And I think they can that a Ukrainian nation does emerge from this war. That nation is going to really, you know, this is separate from what the boundaries are at the end of the war. We can't really talk about that until we see how the war goes. But they will be strong against Russia. We're not going to have to go around and beg them, oh, please pay the 2% you promised, you know, of GDP for defense spending

for NATO. You know, they're going to pay their dues and more. And they are going to be a presence. You put them together with the Poles, the Baltic republics and places like Finland and Sweden and Norway who are much more concerned about Russia than some of the countries in other parts of Europe and by the way, the UK. And you have a block of countries in Europe that really wants to keep Russia contained. And we won't be like defending for them. They will be real allies really working with us. And Ukraine is a key to that. So that's part of it.

Do you think Ukraine can win the war?

Winning, losing, you know, what do we mean by winning? You know, you'd have to tell me what by winning, get all of their territory back?

No, forget Crimea. Forget some of, I mean, but fundamentally, do you think Ukraine will emerge from this war being an independent nation state capable of protecting itself and that Putin and Russia will somehow be chastened? I guess that's what I mean by winning.

Right now, things are on track to work in that way. That is the way things are headed now.

You know, war is uncertain. Putin can certainly pull some rabbits out of a hat.

This does not look like a short war at this point. And there are lots of twists and turns in any war. I think about how so far in this war at the beginning, everybody said, oh, Russia will win in a week. Then Western sanctions are going to throw Putin out of power. The conventional wisdom has flipped and flopped on this war. So I can't promise you Ukraine is going to win. Right now it is on a good track. And I do believe that the Ukrainians are prepared to do whatever it takes. So I think if we aid them, continue aiding them, I think they can win.

Walter, what do you say to the people, some of your colleagues, perhaps making the argument that Russia is a distraction from China, as you said before, that any dollar spent in Kiev is a dollar not spent in Taiwan? What's your response to that argument? Well, in the first place, you have to say you're right, a dollar spent in Ukraine is not being spent in Taiwan. But I don't think it's that simple. For one thing, I think Putin's attack on Ukraine has been a real wake-up call for a lot of people in America. You know, like in World War II, really, Hitler was a much bigger danger than Japan, but it was Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor that kind of really woke everyone in America up to the mess we were in. And so, yes, Franklin Roosevelt said Europe first, and we didn't put as much effort against Japan, particularly early in the war, but nevertheless, Pearl Harbor from the Lesser Power helped wake us up. I think Putin's attack on Ukraine has had some of that impact. Again, I note that our defense budget is going up, even as people are talking about reining in other kinds of spending. So we're not all the way there yet, but we're moving. That's part of it. Another part of it is that we do need to keep Russia in balance in Eastern. We can't let it dominate because if Russia, say, conquered Ukraine, if it succeeded, it's going to immediately start

making trouble further west. You know, it's not that if Russia has, it's not if you give Hitler Czechoslovakia, you know, he'll be fine. No, then he'll want Poland. The Russians have already said, this is not just me, the Russians are saying, you know, this is the first step. They want to keep going. They want the Baltic Republics. We see how they work in Hungary, Romania, other countries. So if Russia won, we'll be more distracted from China because Russia will be pressing more seriously against things that really matter even more. So given that Russia is going to be a problem and is going to be aligned with China for the foreseeable future, having a strong block of countries united around besides us, who are absolutely committed to the idea of keeping Russia in its place, that helps us with China. It doesn't hurt us. But the other thing going on that is important. While I was in Kiev, I spent a fair amount of time with some of the people involved in this. This is the first real war of the information age. And you've got on both sides, you know, you've got drones, you've got all kinds of information going on, you've had all kinds of hacking that, you know, remember the Heimars, those artillery that the Ukraine's raising so well? Yes, of course. Right. Well, they're not very useful now because the Russians have figured out how to scramble the GPS, which is what they use. So they're not really precision weapons anymore. And they're so expensive, it doesn't make sense to use them if you can't really precisely direct them. And so trying to figure out, so you get action and counteraction. And Ukrainians are trying to figure out, okay, what do you do now? But this war always accelerates technological progress because everybody's trying as hard as they can to think of new ways of bringing pressure to bear on the enemy in some way. And the enemy is always presenting you with new challenges, which you then have to overcome. All right. We want, it seems to me, we want our tech companies and we want the DOD, Department of Defense, to be in on this. And we want to be learning to see the dynamics of this kind of thing. And we want to have the benefits of that, of the technology that's emerging from this. So in the same way, like in Israel, where their constant need to defend themselves from cyber attacks and so on, help power the rise of that Israeli tech sector, which the US is very heavily involved with and which then has been a huge force multiplier for our own Pentagon and our own weapons development. This is an opportunity for us and the Ukrainians want our cooperation. They want us to be there more. And so I think this is something that we really need to be doing and we benefit from tremendously. Let's talk a bit about the Chinese threat. It seems like there are two competing stories about China, one in which they're beating us or at least threatening to beat us. They're beating us in tech or at least trying to. They're more efficient. Their economy is rebounding after coming out of zero COVID lockdowns for these three years. And this is the Chinese moment. The other story is that China is actually more of a paper tiger. They are not charismatic, that they have a declining population for the first time since the 1960s. The Chinese population shrank by 850,000 people in 2022. Birth rates are low. China is having fewer kids. As I just said, zero COVID didn't help. It turned people against the government in a lot of ways. Which is it? Which story do you believe about China? I believe we can't actually know. And so we need to prepare for the worst and hope for the best. I'm also not sure which of those scenarios is the most dangerous for us. Because you see, if in Beijing they think, you know what, we're rising power. Like right now we go to war over Taiwan. It's going to be really ugly and painful. But you know what, if we wait 10 years, we'll have gained so much that it'll be easier. So let's not go through this hassle now. Let's wait. So while long term, the rising China might be more dangerous for us, in the short term,

a China that thinks, you know what, I mean, one of the reasons Putin is a problem is because he sees that Russia is a declining power and he thinks he needs to move fast or he'll have no choice. If he waits 10 years, it won't get better for him. It'll get worse.

So what should we be doing now? Let's assume we don't know the answer. We don't know if China's a paper tiger or China is actually an enormous threat. What should our posture be as America?

We should be doing everything in our power to make sure that Xi Jinping wakes up every morning and

thinks, would invading Taiwan, attacking Taiwan be a good decision for me or a bad decision?

We want him to say it would be a bad decision. We've totally dropped the ball on military preparedness. 20 years ago, 10 years ago, there was really no military chance for China to actually attack Taiwan with any success. China has been building up, building up, building up. We have been telling ourselves beautiful stories about other things that we thought were much more important. And now we're in this position where it's a much more dangerous situation.

This is actually one of those cases when having a strong military reduces the threat of war rather than increasing it. One of the things I find shocking is that Americans seem broadly uninterested in China. I think it's sort of a national scandal that Wall Street,

tech, or universities, I could go on, are in business with a country that is at worst

carrying out a genocide and at best has a system of technological social control over its people that is absolutely anathema to everything America is supposed to be about. You ask CEOs as I have basic questions about China and it's like their tongue was cut out. It's as if they don't actually live in a free society because that's how scared they are about pissing off China.

How did that happen and why isn't that a bigger scandal?

It's totally natural for a society like the United States to take a long time to recognize a danger. That's our pattern. People sometimes accuse us of being quick on the draw or so on.

Actually, our pattern, look at Nazi Germany all during the 1930s. You could read what Hitler said in Mein Kampf or for that matter, look at the way we were talking about Uncle Joe Stalin. We're going to be able to build an alliance with Stalin after World War II. It's not going to be a problem.

So-and-so was a member of the Communist Party, but surely he's not a spy now. He can advise senior State Department officials. We were very relaxed. Then unfortunately, in some ways, when we woke up, we overdid it with McCarthyism and so on. That's a bit of a danger now, but this is our pattern. But what we're seeing, I do think, is a kind of an awakening. For one thing, the Chinese are really not that interested in making a lot of money for American companies anymore. They're much more interested in controlling their own tech sector. They're much more interested in stealing your intellectual property than helping you operate a profitable business in China.

So we're actually seeing, I think, that in universities where there is more awareness now than there used to be of what China has become, and China has changed. I would go to China seven or eight years ago and lecture in universities, some of my books were translated into Chinese, not that I ever saw any royalties from any of these translations. But I could have very frank conversations, very human conversations with all kinds of people in Chinese society about even the most sensitive political issues. And now? Well, I haven't been back since COVID, but from what I hear, that's just not possible. And from what I see of Chinese and international settings, you really have to watch the party line. They arrest people who give too much information to foreigners. There's a real crackdown. So China is much less of a free society today than it was 10 years ago. So we've touched on Russia. We've touched on China. Another major

theme I see when I look around the world is the rise of illiberal democracies, I think would be the way to say it. Viktor Orban in Hungary is an open advocate of things like shutting down universities, like encroaching on freedom of the press, like packing the courts to the point where Hungary, I believe, is the first and only EU state to be considered only partly free by Freedom House. And it's not just Hungary, of course, it's Poland. It's Turkey, which just reelected Erdogan for the third time, who's been in power for over 20 years. Help makes sense of this phenomenon to me. What explains the popularity and the staying power of men like Erdogan and

Orban? And should we expect to see more democracies sort of making a turn from mostly liberal democracies to more of illiberal democracies? Yeah, I think we're going to see, again, this rise of populism and it's Le Pen, it looks like she could possibly win the next presidential election in France. It doesn't always turn out the way people fear, you know, it's a fairly far-right government in Italy now, but they don't seem to have gone the Hungarian route. There are different things in different countries. Erdogan has represented the revolt of the Turkish rust belt and ordinary Turkey against those evil metropolitan elites in Istanbul and so on and so forth. So it's kind of a red state, blue state thing. And the blues, when they were in power, the liberals the Kamalists were not really that liberal. They were pretty ruthless in kind of setting standards for how you could practice your religion, you know, women, couldn't wear headscarves in universities,

that sort of thing. They were pretty tough and so that a lot of resentment built up and you can see it's spilling out. India, again, you had a lot of Hindus who felt that the secularism of Nairobi in India was really continuing a kind of a colonization of the Hindus. So you're having these majoritarian revolts. The key, I think, is in leadership. Franklin Roosevelt, in some ways, was a very populist, you know, who's elected as by a populist revolt against what was seen as a failed establishment. And he was accused at the time of seizing all kinds of power over. And as you know, we tried to pack the Supreme Court, broke the two term tradition in a lot of ways, looking at Franklin Roosevelt from the outside, you might say, illiberal populist. But at the end of the day, he was a liberal. And I think this is where, you know, this is where there needs to be, the populism is real, the sense of alienation, frustration. I asked myself the question, why aren't we producing the leaders who can win the trust of people because they really do understand care and then lead people to a better place? Why isn't our leadership class doing what it needs to do? Why is we as a society aren't producing these people? As we're looking at the state of the world, whether we're looking at Russia's war against Ukraine, whether we're looking at Turkey, Russia, China, the thing that sort of sits at the back of policymakers minds is the question of nuclear proliferation. Ever since Hiroshima, the prospect of a kind of apocalyptic nuclear catastrophe has seemed like the greatest human cause threat to our world. Maybe some would now say it's AI, but I still think it's nuclear war. And it's almost like, you know, why are we worried about the debt ceiling or whether or not Americans are having enough children or any of the things we've talked about so far when we have the almost inhuman capability to wipe out entire cities? You know, how do we live with that reality? And how is that existential threat sort of the low hum in the background to every other conversation we're having when it comes to foreign policy? First of all, you're right. It is. I would argue that the kind of foundation of modern consciousness is what we see in the 1940s. And in 1944, the Soviets break into the extermination camps in eastern Poland. And we realize that all of those hopes of the enlightenment that social and scientific

technological progress would cure the evil in the human heart and make us better people so we wouldn't do the terrible things of old. Turns out to be false. The most civilized, enlightened, advanced country in Europe had done these unspeakable things. Then a year later, with the nuclear explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we see that this unreformed human animal, which contains the

capable of the darkest imaginable evils, now has its hands on weapons that could destroy the world. And I would argue that we have those two facts are the dominant background to human consciousness ever since.

After the break, how to navigate our uncertain world

and why Walter is ultimately optimistic about our future. Stay with us.

Okay, let's talk a little bit about how we should navigate the uncertain moment that we're living in, this moment that you've described, both as a kind of perpetual revolution, a permanent revolution, and also as a pre-war era. Given that sense, and given the sort of tumult all over the world, what should America's posture be? Large swaths of both the left and the right right now are thinking, just as one example, why are we pouring billions of dollars into Ukraine, especially given the economic situation here at home? If China invades Taiwan, why should we have anything to do with that? What is the best counterargument to the emerging consensus in parts of the left and the right that is anti-interventionist, that fundamentally believes that America's role in the world should be a diminished one? What is the strongest counterargument to that increasingly powerful claim being made?

I would say the most powerful argument is just going to be events, in the sense that if more Americans think that way, the world is going to keep getting darker, and the threats are going to grow more intense and more clear. I do believe that we are seeing this with respect to both Russia and China. It's actually amazing how well support for Ukraine has held up in the polls, even at a time of great partisanship. I just spent some time not long ago with a number of members of the select committee on China in the House that Mike Gallagher chairs.

What I heard from the Democrats on that panel is that it's a really bipartisan panel, and that they really are working hard toward consensus, and there's a lot of common ground. You can read in some foreign reporting about the United States that people are struck from outside how there's a much bigger consensus here about China than there is about other things. I actually tend to think that events are making the case for why the U.S. needs to be involved, and that's likely to continue. Do you think it's a luxury belief that Americans have that we can somehow pull back from the world?

Again, I think as we try that out, we won't like what we see, and in fact, we'll find that it's very expensive to do some of these things. Now, that doesn't mean that I don't think we need to invade every country, and I certainly don't think we should be trying to set up democracies and fighting endless wars in all kinds of places, but I think if we have a disciplined understanding of our economic and security interests, they're not infinite, and there are lots of reasons to believe that the policies needed to maintain the framework of a world that works for us can be done effectively and not super astronomical risk and cost.

So, clearer strategic thinking about both what our interests are and what the limits on our interests are, plus greater public awareness of the dangers that are out there, I'm more hopeful that we're moving in that direction maybe than you are, but where I would say we really do need

to work harder is to think about making America work better for more people here at home. You know, the fact that we have a university system that saddles students with unpayable, undischARGEABLE debts and that in a state like California house prices, the average house price is close to, what, \$700,000, we're literally creating a society that makes it impossible for young people to do the things that young people need to do. You know, how do we change that? How do we get back to where the average person can buy, you know, average 30-year-old can realistically make a down payment on a house in a place like California?

Walter, a lot of people view Trump's election as proof that if not our country then certainly our values, the American, basic American values or the moral guardrails of America were sort of slipping away. And I think whether it's Trump or any number of other catalysts, a lot of Americans again on the left and the right are asking questions today that I think were unthinkable 50 years ago or maybe not unthinkable but certainly unsayable. Questions like, is America worth preserving? Is our system fundamentally just and fair? Or is the system itself the problem? And other existential questions of that nature that I hear regularly in talking to lots of different people, I wonder how you answer the basic question, is America's system fundamentally good and worth preserving? Can you make that case to someone who feels that fundamentally it's rotten and they could be coming really from the left to the right? Yeah, again, I think you don't make that case as much in words as you do in deeds that what we need is political movements that could be grounded in either or both parties that actually offer solutions to the problems that people see. The Communist Party in the United States was doing pretty well in the 30s, so were all kinds of neo-Nazi or fascist sympathizing groups. But in the 50s when things were back on track in the United States, those movements kind of disappeared. I remember in 1970, my senior in high school, all the cool kids thought that we needed a revolution in the United States. The SDS, you had the bombers, people didn't go for the bombers so much, but the belief that the American system was fundamentally flawed and that only revolutionary change that would get rid of capitalism or whatever, that was like a hegemonic form of thought on a lot of campuses in those days. And what changed it was the system started to work. You know, you're not going to win every argument with every angry person. What you need to do is think long and hard about where are things, where are changes that would really help? How do you pull together the political coalition and the ideas that can make that happen? One of the phenomena of our time politically that I'm especially intrigued by and feel myself personally grappling with is this sense that liberalism isn't enough. And I see this sense, and maybe you'll say this is a phenomenon just of being young, that in the same way people in your time, like long for the revolution, young people in our time long for sort of the hard stuff, right? Liberalism seems sort of limp and people are reaching toward maybe authoritarianism, maybe it's communism. You just have that sense, especially when you talk to

young people. What is your feeling about that? Is liberalism enough? You know, why is liberalism worth fighting for? Liberalism by itself is not enough, I don't believe.

And let's define what we mean when we're saying liberalism. Well, I think of liberalism as the idea of compromise, of toleration, an openness to allow everyone to go through life, making their own choices in so far as this is at all, you know, comfortable with public order.

I think of liberalism is like the ivy, but it needs a tree. If it's going to get anywhere, it needs a tree. And I think maybe the sense among many people is the tree is missing right now.

That's exactly right. If liberalism tries to stand on its own, it's, you know, toleration is not enough. I have to believe in something to be tolerant about, you know, I have to care enough about something that actually when you're pursuing something different, I need to, I need to feel that I'm still, I'm clinging to something, I'm standing on something. But I believe, you know, just as in America, the support for separation of church and state has historically mostly come from Christians who thought that conflating them is bad for the church and for the state, that if you have a state church, then all kinds of total hypocrites will be getting into the state church for the money, for the prestige and the power, and you're going to corrupt religion as well as like have a state that goes all wonky. And so liberalism, a liberal approach to church and state combined with a strong religious faith works. So how did it come to be that people mistook the ivy for the tree itself, and what should the tree itself be made of? What's the stuff of that tree in a healthy America? Okay, well, I actually believe that this kind of Anglo-American tradition of, let's call it, liberal conservatism or conservative liberalism, kind of Berkianism, where you understand that a society needs tradition, roots, grounding, right? But the purpose of tradition, roots and grounding is not immobility and inflexibility, but your tradition is leading you toward change. Maybe that there's this guy, Henri Berksen was a French philosopher, early 20th century, mid 20th century, who talked about the difference between static and dynamic religion. And he talks about a closed society like a hive of bees operates on instinct. Every bee knows what to do, there really aren't choices, and it's always the same. But a group of human beings, it's rather different. But he says in human beings, instinct actually kind of, you see it in consciousness, how do you explain it? That you're in a tribe and there's a taboo that boys of the fish clan are not allowed to marry girls of the squirrel clan or whatever it might be, right? And so you find yourself really attracted toward a girl from the wrong clan. And maybe you have a dream in which your grandmother points her bony finger at you and says, don't do that, right? Obey the traditions. And you kind of wake up in a cold sweat and you realize you need to conform. That's static religion and forcing tradition. But in the same way, in human society, there's an instinct for change. You think about it, we come off the savannas in Africa, now you have Eskimos hunting whales in skin boats off the arctic waste. You have Tibetans at high mountain altitudes and people just all over living in all these different ways. Human beings have an instinct for change. And one points to the call of Abraham in the book of Genesis, where God says, appears to Abraham and says, you know, get up and go, leave your father's home. Yes. Leave your father's home. Leave your home. Go off and go to a new land and there you'll find me, all right? And so I think a dynamic religious faith, which is grounded, but which points to something new, that I think gets, is very close to what the kind of Anglo-American culture has been grounded on. And I think it's and do you think that that can be recovered? I don't think it's ever really gone away. I think it's, you know, how many people in America still feel that, you know, hey, my parents were one thing, but my job is to go be something else. And how many families encourage their kids, you know, try new things, go do a job that your dad, your father was a shoemaker, you go be a doctor, you go be whatever. I think we still have this notion of change. Maybe it's getting a little weaker, but I think it's still a huge think of all the Americans that have gone to Silicon Valley to invent new things. Even think of this endless quest for like new religious traditions, new religious ideas. I think we are still a society that's very much in ferment and that feels that

change is kind of part of who we are.

Walter, why are people so repelled by the consensus politics that we grew up, that I grew up with, that capitalism is good, that thick liberalism is the bedrock of American life, that the nuclear family is something to strive for? And what do you see replacing that? Or maybe you'll say that it actually hasn't been replaced. And that's just sort of like this radical chic posture that a lot of people articulate, but actually don't live out. Well, I do notice that a lot of the people who talk the most about radical new ways of living are married and are raising their kids in fairly structured ways. And that they tend to be sort of, it's a liberalism of the lips and a conservatism of the lifestyle. So I'm not, and that's as an elite phenomenon. I think the people who were hurt by that are often people from outside of that liberal bubble who only hear the rhetoric and so on and somehow think, okay, all of this rhetoric is the way to build the life that I see those people in the bubble living, but it isn't. Obviously, it's all that discipline and making sure your kid does their homework and being on them all the time for growth and development and creativity and the latest ways of teaching them, all of that tremendous drive and focus that people actually still have. There's a cliché that those who don't learn history are doomed to repeat it. And I've been thinking about that phrase a lot lately because I think that you can know a lot about history and sense that from that knowledge get a sense of what moment we're in

or what time it is, but it doesn't necessarily give you any power to change things. And I wonder how you feel as someone who really knows their stuff, how you feel living in this current moment, living in what you call the pre-war moment, wanting to maybe shout from the rooftops about how we can avoid catastrophe, but maybe being unable to do that because people can't hear you.

Well, one of the things that I have to say, one of the things I've learned from my study of history is that most people don't learn very much from history and that history has a lot of lessons, but not that many people are interested in learning them. But look, I think, as I say, I see some positive things happening. I see American society beginning to come to grips with this very threatening international environment. And we haven't talked about the positive side of the information revolution and, you know, sort of vast advances in human productivity, medicine, so many other things. I really do think that in the end, I think the opportunity and for a benign transformation of our situation, of yet again coming out of one of these moments of national doubt and self-questioning, I think that's very possible. I think we are not so far as far away from that as people think. And so I'm kind of optimistic here, worried but optimistic.

Walter Russell Mead, thank you so much for coming on, honestly. Thank you. Enjoyed it.

Thanks for listening and thanks to Walter for making time to come on the show.

I should add that Walter is the host of a brand new podcast that he's doing in collaboration with Tablet magazine. It's called What Really Matters that I recommend you check it out.

If you like this conversation, if it made you think, if there were parts that you disagreed with, or you wanted to learn more, that's all great. Share this with your friends and family and use it to have a discussion of your own. Last but certainly not least, if you want to support honestly, there's one way to do it. You do it by going to the Free Press's website, by going to thefp.com and becoming a subscriber today. We'll see you next time.