

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

Judy was boring.
Hello.
Then Judy discovered chumbacasino.com.
It's my little escape.
Now Judy's the life of the party.
Oh, baby, mama's bringing home the bacon.
Whoa, take it easy, Judy.
Ch-ch-ch-ch-chumba.
The chumba life is for everybody.
So go to chumbacasino.com and play over 100 casino style games.
Join today and play for free for your chance
to redeem some serious prizes.
Ch-ch-ch-chumba.
Chumbacasino.com.
No purchase necessary for you are prohibited by law.
18 plus terms and conditions apply.
See website for details.
I'm Michael Moynihan, in for Barry Weiss.
And this is Honestly.
As we tumble towards 2024, anxiety among Democrats
is beginning to simmer.
It's easy to understand why.
One of my staff members said, remember the famous song,
you know, Good Morning Vietnam, or Good Evening Vietnam.
Last week, Biden found himself on stage in Vietnam,
giving a press conference about upgrading the country's
diplomatic ties.
When he started rambling.
There's famous lines from movies that he always quotes,
you know, and one of them is there is...
These are the words that came out of the president's mouth.
The Indian looks at John Wayne and points to the Union,
so says he's a lion dog-faced pony soldier.
The Indian looks at John Wayne and points to the Union soldier
and says he's a lying dog-faced pony soldier.
Well, there's a lot of lying dog-faced pony soldiers out there
about global warming.
But not anymore.
He continued.
I'm just following my orders here.
Then he said he was going to bed.
I don't know about you, but I'm going to go to bed.
Before he left the podium,

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

he mumbled something about the Third World.
We talked about making sure that the Third World,
you know, is giving me the Third World.
But quickly corrected himself
because we don't say Third World anymore.
Southern Hemisphere had access to change.
It's the Southern Hemisphere.
Thank you, everybody, this ends the conference.
Thank you.
Thank you.
Thank you, everybody, this ends the conference.
The voice suddenly emerged.
Jazz music started to play.
Biden tried to answer another question,
but they cut off his mic.
This, ladies and gentlemen,
is the president of the United States
and the man the Democratic establishment believes
is best suited to again win
the highest office in the land.
A man who, if elected for a second term,
would be 86 by the end of it.
According to a recent CNN poll,
56% of Democrats are seriously concerned
for Biden's current level of physical
and mental competence.
62% of Democrats say they're seriously concerned
about Biden's ability to serve a full second term.
Another poll, this one from the Associated Press,
found that 69% of Democrats surveyed
think Biden is too old for a second term.
Among the people not convinced
that Biden needs to be in a nursing home
is my guest today, Atlantic staff writer Frank Four,
whose new book, The Last Politician,
tells the behind-the-scenes story
of Biden's first two years in office.
Force as he started is a Biden skeptic.
The incoming president was, in his estimation,
a bloviator who dangerously fetishized bipartisanship.
But he emerges some 400 pages later
with a rather more charitable view of the president.
Biden is the father figure of the West,

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

someone deeply experienced in foreign policy
and racking up policy victories at home.
Biden, he writes, is an instructive example
of the tedious nobility of the political vocation,
unheroic but honorably human.
He will be remembered as the old hack who could.
So why doesn't the public see it that way?
What if Hunter Biden's legal troubles,
the impeachment inquiry,
what should we make of the many Democratic hopefuls
eagerly waiting in the wings?
And what would it take for one of them to step forward?
And is America's political gentocracy
a challenge for American democracy?
Those questions and more after the break,
we'll be right back.
That means if you don't love Cozy Earth's bamboo sheets,
you have 100 days to get your money back.
Start with Cozy Earth's best-selling bamboo sheet set.
They're super soft, ethically sourced sheets
that regulate your temperature,
so they keep you cool in summer and warm in winter.
Cozy Earth also has pajamas, loungewear, bath towels, and more.
Experience the brand that's been on the Bible of Stuff,
also known as Oprah's favorite things, five years in a row.
Go to CozyEarth.com and enter code BERRY for up to 40% off.
That's CozyEarth.com promo code BERRY.
CozyEarth.com code BERRY.
This episode of Honestly is brought to you by Indeed.
If you're like me and scanning thousands of identical profiles
on LinkedIn is not exactly your idea of a fun Saturday night.
You should use Indeed.
Indeed is the hiring partner you can count on
to attract, interview, and hire all in one place.
Indeed is the only job site where you're guaranteed
to find quality applications that meet your must-have requirements.
Or else, you don't pay.
Instead of spending hours on multiple job sites,
hoping to find candidates with the right skills,
use Indeed to help you find talent quick
through tools such as Instant Match,
assessments, and virtual interviews.
When you pay to post a job,

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

Instant Match immediately shows you candidates whose resumes fit your description so you can hire faster. You pay only for the applications that meet your hiring criteria. Join more than three million businesses worldwide that use Indeed to hire great talent fast. Start hiring now with a limited-time \$75 sponsored job credit to upgrade your post at Indeed.com slash honestly. It's good for a limited time. Visit Indeed.com slash honestly and tell them you heard about it on the podcast. Indeed.com slash honestly. Terms and conditions apply, costs per application, pricing not available for everyone. I picked up the book, very hard, by the way, to know how long a book is when you get it in Kindle. Yes. An exhaustive book, a very detailed book on a number of important issues. But at the top of the book, you say that you went into this having an opinion of Joe Biden. You don't really elucidate what that opinion was. But you say it changed during the reporting for the book and came out with a more positive idea of who Joe Biden was as a person and a politician. Explain that a little bit. Well, I've always thought he was a bit of a hack and he was the quintessence for me of the politician that he had all of this artificiality. It's like the stories or the same stories over and over again. There was this sense that he would say anything to a crowd and then do something different behind closed doors. And one of the first times I encountered him, I was 24 years old and I was somehow able to get him on the telephone, which I guess at that stage in his career wasn't that hard for any reporter. And five minutes into the conversation, I'm thinking, get this guy off the phone. His stories are just never going to end. And it was the same thing that everybody else sees about him, that it's like he's talking about Senator Mike Mansfield in the 1970s and it was just very, very painful. But over time observing him up close, I think some of his hackish tendencies were things

that mutated into things that I saw as strengths
and these things that I see disappearing
from the rest of our political system,
that there are not very many figures
who are kind of these cornball politicians
in the way that Joe Biden is, who exist anymore.
And there's a lot of technique
that goes into the way that Joe Biden moves about the world.
He's a guy who has theories about how power
should be wielded.
And the artificiality, this understanding,
one of the things that I think is so interesting
about the guy in the end is he's so messy.
He's like one of the most supremely human beings I've ever met.
And the messiness kind of informs the way
that he practices politics,
that because he wears his ambitions,
his insecurities, his humanness on his sleeve,
he's able to identify those qualities in foreign leaders
or Republican senators that he deals with
and that forms the basis for the calculations he makes
when he's dealing with them.
You give some practical examples of that in the book.
Sort of recount a few of those now.
I mean, when you see that in a politician,
I always thought of him as a bit of a cornball
and a bit of a phony,
primarily because of those stories that are supposed to be folksy
and they end up, so this might be straddling the line
of just being untrue and maybe just being a lie
and politicians lie, but he seemed to do it in a way,
it was rather different from everybody else,
but it was usually an anecdote.
It wasn't about numbers, it was, I was here, I was there,
this was something about my past.
But if that is a positive attribute to a politician,
how does that manifest itself in reality?
Right. One example is the way in which he's dealt
with Vladimir Putin over time.
And so Putin calls him the second day that he's in office
and there's a debate, do you take the call,
do you not take the call?
Putin's done a lot to interfere in our elections.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

Let's just make him wait in line with the attitude of his advisors.
And Biden's attitude was we've aired in the past with Russia by treating it as a second-rate nation and that Putin is likely to do me damage.
And the best I can do in terms of containing him is to exhibit some outward signs of respect to him.
And so he calls him back in that conversation.
At the same time, he believes in telegraphing whatever the consequences will be for whatever bad acts Putin engages in.
And so the next time they meet is in Geneva and that's very intentional setting because he's decided rather than meeting with him on the fringes of a summit,
I need to respect him as big man on campus.
And so I'm going to create this setting that's going to have the trappings of Regivik or some other meeting with the Soviet leaders because that might work with him.
And so obviously that fails in the end.
But the other thing that was interesting about that was he told his advisors,
look, I can't leak anything about this in advance because Putin will feel like he's walking into an ambush.
And afterwards, somebody on his staff told me that he's just very aware of the insecurities that foreign leaders have because he has these insecurities themselves and he doesn't want to make somebody feel slighted if that's going to somehow disadvantage him.
I mean, you pointed out it did fail, ultimately.
I mean, Regivik, Reagan actually alarmed his staffers by saying, let's give up all nukes in his staffers.
What is he talking about?
We didn't talk about this beforehand.
But Regivik was a success in a lot of ways.
I mean, it pushed us towards, you know, the glass-nosed perestroika era.
Obviously, the interactions with Putin have been far less successful.
And, you know, you see this even back in the Obama times and obviously this was part of his portfolio,

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

part of his remit with Ukraine, et cetera,
the reset button.

People on the Trump side of the aisle say,
this never would have happened,
this being the invasion of Ukraine, on Donald Trump's watch.
But it did happen on Joe Biden's watch.

This will be an argument that's obviously going to be made
during the campaign.

And you write pretty extensively about his interactions
with Zelensky and Ukraine.

What do you think went wrong there from Biden's?

And do you think, and this is speculation,
but do you think it would have been different
under a different president?

I think he was on an adversarial course with Joe Biden,
which was different than the course
that he was on with Donald Trump.

And I think maybe, ironically, having somebody
who spoke more strongly about him
was triggering in some way to his insecurities.

And you look at the way that Putin talked about his invasion.

I mean, there are all of these grand historical reasons
why he launched it that have nothing to do
with who is in power at any given moment,
that during the pandemic he sat alone
in the Black Sea reading Russian history
and bemoaning the fact that he hadn't done anything
to reconstitute the Russian Empire.

I think the perception that he had that Zelensky
was incredibly weak fueled a lot of his thinking.

And then also, he saw Europe was an incredible transition,
that Angela Merkel was no longer the chancellor in Germany,
so there was an opportunity there.

He saw that Macron was weak.

And explicitly, that's how he thought about it all.

One thing that is interesting about the way that he thinks
about Biden is that he was clearly closely attuned
to Biden's physique and health,
and he believed that Biden was somebody
who was probably in decline at the outset.

And then after his first meeting,
when he walked into Geneva, his first remark was,
wow, you look so much better than I thought you did.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

And then afterwards, he apparently-

What a nice opening.

I'm exaggerating a little bit in the way that he described it.

And he called Angela Merkel afterwards,
and he told her, hey, Biden looked more fit
than I thought he would.

You mentioned Ukraine as one of Biden's policy successes.

I mean, there's a lot of debate about this now
with a new round of funding

for the Ukrainian military coming up.

Zelensky's visiting Washington next week.

You have a scene at the beginning of that chapter about Ukraine
in which Zelensky comes in and treats Biden
in a way that you find slightly disrespectful.

Is that a fair way of describing it?

Yeah, I think that Zelensky was suffering a lot of trauma
from various interactions with Donald Trump
and was a bit unsure about how to deal with an American head of state.

My personal theory is that there's also some
almost subconscious projection of blame onto Biden
for the Hunter Biden stuff,

which was so complicating for Zelensky.

But Zelensky also had watched the U.S. end sanctions on Nord Stream 2,
which made him feel personally insecure
about his standing with the Biden administration.

So he walks into this meeting with Biden,

I think feeling very insecure and nervous.

And in my view, based on the various tellings of that meeting
that I was able to absorb,

he interacted with Biden in a way in which he was the one wearing
his insecurities on his sleeve.

He was kind of so desperate to ask for NATO membership,
understandably so, justifiably so.

And Biden's reaction was like,

that's just not going to happen right now.

And I think he felt very put off by that

and then started making arguments to Biden

about how NATO was ultimately going to prove irrelevant
because the French and Germans were losing interest in it.

And for Biden, the whole thing felt nonlinear.

It felt like he was getting this argument that was so emotional.

And one of the things that's so fascinating about Scranton Joe
is that he has this moral code about the way that the United States

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

should interact with various countries.
And going back to Afghanistan, you see this in other places,
when the United States makes sacrifices on behalf of another country
and displays solidarity and sends arms and aides
and puts its troops in peril,
he expects the client state to behave in a way
that reciprocates the beneficence with gratitude.
And I think one source of tension in his relationship
with Zelensky over time
was that he didn't feel the gratitude.
And that sounds kind of appalling on one level, right?
Because Ukraine is fighting this existential struggle
for its survival.
I mean, who cares if Joe Biden feels any sense of gratitude
for the arms that he's sending to Ukraine?
But I think Biden's point,
which is a little bit deeper than the one that I just made,
is that publics in the West are actually sacrificing
on behalf of the Ukrainian cause,
whether in the form of higher gas prices
or just an enormous amount of money that's being sent out the door,
and that politicians like himself
need to feel like they're at least seeing his gratitude
that they're getting some credit for that work that they're doing.
And in the long run, that type of credit
will help them make the case for Ukraine.
Now, I could counter that
and say that it's actually Zelensky's ability
to apply public pressure on Western leaders
to speak over their heads to Western publics,
which has been the basis for the popular support
that we've had in the war.
And in the end, I would say that they're both probably right
in their analyses.
And this relates to the way that Joe Biden, in some ways,
interacts with the American left,
is that he's a politician.
He's somebody who may resent being pushed,
but exists to be pushed to go into a different direction.
He needs to form these sorts of symbiotic relationships
with somebody like Zelensky or somebody like Bernie Sanders
because they create the political space for him to do
the thing that he ultimately wants to do.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

Let's talk about that.

I mean, you said in Biden's interactions with the political left, you have a chapter in the book called Go Left, Young Man.

Am I remembering that correctly?

Yes, that's correct.

So it was during a debate where Joe Biden says,

you know, I am the Democratic Party now,

and he's telegraphing the fact that he's a centrist.

The people that he was running against were kind of listing to the left,

but that was not going to be the person running for president.

And then he did go quite far to the left,

to the surprise of a lot of people, including myself.

What do you make of his lurch to the left

and maybe his kind of return to the center

around time he's going to run for the presidency again?

Right.

So there's the element of personal ambition and underestimation

that is one of the great themes in Joe Biden's biography.

Anybody who read Richard Ben Cramer's amazing book

about the people who ran for president in 1988

know that Biden is somebody who has a chip on his shoulder

and really is driven by the sense that elites never give him his full due

and that therefore he needs to constantly prove

that the elite is wrong for underestimating him.

It's sort of Nixonian, isn't it?

It's a little bit Nixonian.

That everybody thinks that this guy is going to be a placeholder president.

He's just going to be a return to normal.

And in his mind, he didn't wait around his whole life to be that placeholder.

He wanted to join the pantheon of great Democratic presidents.

So there's that element.

And then I think the other thing is that he was acutely aware of the fact

that he's presiding over a governing coalition

where the left just happens to be a significant part of it.

So there was an element of realism there as well,

that after the primaries he holds the series of meetings

or his staff hold the series of meetings with people from the Sanders

and Warren campaigns and they come up with this synthetic platform.

And one of the things that was interesting to me during the presidential campaign in 2020

is nobody actually paid attention to what he was saying his policy would be when he was president.

It's not like the Build Back Better Bill was anything other than a manifestation of his campaign promises.

Yeah, I mean, it's an interesting thing because I don't understand exactly

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

what Joe Biden believes at this point.

You go back to Joe Biden in the 1990s, even the 1980s.

I mean, he's instrumental in making sure that Robert Bork doesn't sit in the Supreme Court and Anthony Kennedy does.

I mean, it's pretty significant.

But in the 90s, I mean, he's very much a centrist Clinton Democrat and that seemed to be the idea in 2020 that this is a return to the center, not a swing from the far right to the far left.

And then he does go left.

But do you have a sense of what he truly believes in what is just kind of, you know, political posturing and political deal making?

Right.

So at core, Joe Biden is a Nostalgist.

Joe Biden is somebody who suffered a lot in the past, yet is constantly yearning to return to some sort of Eden that exists back then.

And that Eden is more or less the 1950s.

And it's when you had companies like DuPont from his home state of Delaware, which operated in this fundamentally corporatist sort of way to use the political science jargon, where you have a big company that's rooted in a community that has a sense of connection with a community that is in partnership with its unions and its workers.

And everybody is pulling for the common good.

And America is making tactile, tangible things.

That's what he yearns to return to.

And I think the reason that he connected with the parts of the Sanders Warren left at a certain point is because they were pointing in a direction that he could get behind.

Oh, let's manufacture batteries.

Batteries are things that we can make in the United States.

And we could have corporations that don't have an allegiance to global supply chains and that they can be rooted in communities.

The other thing that I didn't really get into the book that I find so I wish I'd gotten into the book is Joe Biden's best friend.

It was his former chief of staff, a guy named Ted Kaufman, who had actually been an engineer at DuPont in the 1960s and then meets Joe Biden and kind of falls in love with Joe Biden and is by his side for decades. And this pair would drive back and forth to Washington every day because Biden had made a promise to his sons in the 1970s and 80s that he would never be outside of a phone call range for them.

And they drove in this big car that had a ginormous mobile phone in the trunk and they would spend all day talking.

Eventually Kaufman gets appointed to fill Biden's spot in the Senate in 2008 and he's just radicalized by the financial crisis in the way that the banks retreated and nobody got rung up for the role in the collapse.

And then Bo Biden, his beloved son, the son that he loves more than anything

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

and he sees as the heir to the Biden dynasty,
it gets really pissed off about the deal that Eric Holder and the Obama Justice Department
create with the banks as it relates to the housing crisis.
And so the two people Biden loves most, Ted Kaufman and Bo Biden
are just like hyping him up about the evils of Wall Street and finance
and that's not really who Joe Biden is.
He's not somebody who's very adversarial or populist in his bone
but he had these populists whispering in his ear during that period.
I mean, how important is populism to Joe Biden's presidency now?
I think it's pretty important because he's not done a very good job of laying out a campaign for 2024
and if he was to lay out a campaign for 2024
that I'm a terrible political consultant and prognosticator
but if I were doing it, I would say, look, Trump promised all of these populist things.
He promised that he would restore American manufacturing,
that he would continue to get tough on China, that he would invest in infrastructure,
he would be a friend of the American worker
and Trump is the Park Avenue guy who never delivered on any of that
and I'm the one who has.
And that seems to me like a pretty classical campaign message.
I mean, you say in the book, you have a Biden advisor
and I don't remember which one it was who said,
maybe Trump was a bit right on China in your chapter on Xi Jinping.
I mean, there seems to be a lot of overlap when it comes to certain populist messages.
I mean, even when it comes to Trump and say Bernie Sanders,
I mean, Bernie Sanders used to be very critical of immigration and critical of trade.
There seems to be this kind of drift away on both parties from free markets and things like that
towards a more populist, I mean, Trump was the one that really did that, didn't he?
Yeah, so there's, you may quibble with this metaphor,
but before Ronald Reagan, there was Jimmy Carter
and Jimmy Carter was the guy who deregulated chunks of the economy,
argued that Washington was broken.
I think that Trump in a certain way stands as the Jimmy Carter of this new political order
because of his personality, because of his political instincts.
He saw that we were exiting the era of globalism and of neoliberalism
and whatever jargon term you want to use
and that Biden, who is able to govern in a much more coherent sort of way,
takes a lot of the stuff that Trump began and is able to operationalize it and extend it
and take it and turn it into something,
whether it's foreign policy, into a grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific
or whether it's an economic policy into an industrial policy.
I mean, industrial policy is a phrase you didn't hear for a long time.
That's kind of it.
No, no.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

Revisiting an old phrase.

And also, I mean, I think one thing, the chapter that you said in Go Left, Young Man, is about these establishment type figures like Jake Sullivan and Brian Deese.

Jake Sullivan is the national security advisor.

Brian Deese was the head of the National Economic Council and they underwent their own ideological evolution.

Yeah, he sounds like a Sandinista at the end of that chapter.

I couldn't believe Jake Sullivan had lurched that part of the left.

Yeah, and he's kind of been the architect of a lot of binomics for lack of a better term.

And I should say, like, I've had my own evolution on this.

Like, what I was writing there was a little bit autobiographical because I had been somebody who I think in the 90s and in the 2000s had basically believed in the consensus about free trade in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

And even, I think to a certain extent, in the aftermath of Trump,

I found myself reconsidering certain economic positions that I'd had.

And so I write about them in a way that is probably too sympathetic for your taste but reflects, I think, my own empathy.

The era of big government is over has now become that the era of big government is back and embraced by both parties.

Somewhat, although it's really striking.

I think that Joe Manchin may have done Biden a certain favor.

So build back better on the eve of Afghanistan was going to be a \$3.5 trillion bill

that would have extended the social safety net in fairly significant sorts of ways.

There would have been a measure of real redistribution in the Biden agenda.

And that would have been the thing that probably would have elevated him into that pantheon of Democratic presidents that he aspired to join.

But Manchin never really believed in it and kept delaying and delaying Afghanistan in the collapse of the president's approval ratings, meant that that was no longer possible.

And then you get to what emerges, which is essentially a green energy policy that's all carrots, no sticks, and all the redistributionist parts of the Biden agenda have been culled.

In a way, I think he does Biden a political favor by letting him emerge with the most capacious, least, tendentious, least controversial version of Bidenomics.

Yeah, and let's talk about Bidenomics for a second.

I mean, not the political phrase, and I don't really think it's taking off very much.

Which has really been all, right?

It's not a great one.

People are rallying to Bidenomics.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

But the economy is not great.

Most people polled, a vast majority of people polled in both parties think it's in a rough patch, gas prices are rising, inflation is eased, but seems to be ticking up again.

And if you listen to people, like somebody mentioned in your book, a Democratic Party grandee like Larry Summers, they say, you know, this is the problem with the spending.

The spending has created this issue that was probably necessary in some way or another during the pandemic.

But after the pandemic, the spending continued, and this is creating out of control inflation.

I mean, what do people around Joe Biden think about this messaging?

Because it's going to be a very difficult one for him to deal with in the next campaign.

So I think that the Summers critique has a lot of truth in it.

Can I just tweak it a little bit?

Which is that you had this wave of pandemic spending, a lot of which happened in the Trump era, and then you have this extra bit of it that happens with the American Rescue Plan that ends up accelerating pre-existing inflationary trends.

But his big objection to the American Rescue Plan and that inflationary spending was that it would actually make it impossible to spend money in other programs that would have long-lasting impacts on the American economy.

And I think that that critique...

Yeah, he certainly wasn't being Milton Friedman about it.

I think that the political critique, I think, is actually the one that is going to be more haunting to the Biden people than the economic critique because inflation was going to be a problem for them, regardless of the Rescue Plan.

But any inflation beyond a certain level is economic pain to people.

And inflation has come down faster in the United States than it has in other countries around the world.

It's still biting, though, isn't it?

It doesn't matter politically or practically, is what you're saying.

And I agree with that.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

And it's a very, very, very hard thing for them
to overcome at the end of the day
because whatever you do for the long run
with your political program
doesn't matter if somebody is experiencing
all of this pain in the short term
and I think that their best hope...
And there's no political argument
that they can make to refute that.
And in fact, I think they've been reluctant
to make a political case for their own accomplishments
because they've been afraid
that people will never listen to them
because of the inflationary pain.
After the break, more with Frank Four.
Stay with us.
Today's episode is brought to you by Masterworks.
Recently, after a painting sold for \$8 million,
2,478 everyday investors
earned some of that profit.
How? Because of Masterworks,
the award-winning platform for investing in blue-chip art.
Masterworks has had 16 exits to date,
netting investors 10, 17, and 35% returns just this year.
The best part of Masterworks
is that you can get in on the fine art market
even if you don't have a helipad
and a cluster of medical school buildings
with your family's name on them.
It's easy to diversify your investing strategy
with Masterworks.
Just go to masterworks.com
slash honestly for priority access.
Past performance is not indicative of future returns
and see important disclosures
at masterworks.com slash cd.
That's masterworks.com
slash honestly for priority access.
Make September a month to remember
at Borgata Online Casino
with a new beast of a game, Buffalo.
Get a 100% deposit match up to \$1,000
plus 20 bonus dollars

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

when you sign up with code NJPABORGATA.
The popular slot is stampeding to Borgata Online
and joins some of the exclusive games
that MGM's Borgata in Atlantic City is famous for,
including the Borgata 777 re-spent slot.
Plus, take your shot at the region's
latest progressive jackpot.
Growing bigger by the minute, download the app
and get a 100% deposit match
and 20 bonus dollars with code NJPABORGATA.
Borgata Online reminds you to play responsibly
and offers resources to help you make appropriate choices.
Gambling problem called 1-800-GAMBLER
must be 21 and over.
New Jersey and Pennsylvania only.
Please gamble responsibly.
Visit borgataonline.com for terms and conditions.
All promotions are subject to qualification
and eligibility requirements.
Rewards issued as non-withdrawable site credit,
bonus bets, unless otherwise provided
in the applicable terms.
Rewards subject to expiry.
When you hear criticisms from,
I mean, even from Biden's left,
but mostly from Republicans,
are there any of those criticisms that you think land?
Sure.
I think that in terms of their COVID policy,
I think that there are a lot of right-wing critiques
that I think are justified.
I think that there's a criticism
that they could have pushed harder to reopen schools,
and I think that that is true.
I think it's maybe more complicated,
obviously, than some of his critics portray,
but in the end, it was a place
where he should have devoted greater political resources,
and he didn't.
I think that he made a big...
But he didn't want to upset Randy Weingarten,
the teachers union,
the largest donor to the Biden campaign, right?

Right.

Well, and the other thing,
the other element of that
that I think is important to recall
is that the nation was potentially
on the brink of labor strife around schools,
and maybe you could argue
it was worth forcing a confrontation there,
but there was real anxiety on behalf of teachers
that going into schools,
and so he had a strategy for managing that.
I would argue he could have been more aggressive
in pushing them.

I think that the vaccine mandate
that he imposed in the end of September
of his first term was a mistake
that his instinct had been right about vaccines,
headed into that,
that vaccines were a question of persuasion
and that coercion was never going to work,
and that he did something that was legally dubious
by imposing a vaccine mandate
and ultimately counterproductive
and ended up exacerbating
the culture war around the vaccine.
I think in terms of foreign policy,
I think the chapters in Afghanistan
and my book were very harrowing to report,
and I felt like I was talking to people
in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal
who were traumatized themselves
by the whole experience,
and while I think the idea of withdrawing
from Afghanistan was correct,
I think that his unwillingness
to engage with the humanitarian consequences
of that decision
and to plan for the humanitarian consequences
of that decision
were a great failing on his part.
From the left,
I mean, it's actually interesting
the ways in which the left

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

isn't that critical of him.

I mean, I think...

Oh, the other thing that I would say,
just criticizing him maybe from the center,
is I think the push that he made for voting rights
was both nonsensical from a political perspective
that he was never going to be able
to get the maximalist Democratic version
of a voting rights bill
and also distracted from coming up
with a centrist voting rights bill
that would have addressed the primary problems
that Trump and his subversionist tactics
posed to democracy,
which struck me as the real threat,
not whether somebody could get a bottle
of water at the 100 foot mark in line.
Well, let's talk about the thing
that the media doesn't stop talking about
and apparently is a very important issue
to voters, too, age.

Yeah.

In your book...

I don't want to say you're dismissive of it,
but you say that...

I have said that Biden should look at his age as a strength
and something to be presented as experience
and that he's pretty sharp
and he gets his notes
and he gives them back to people with scribbled markings on them
and all of his notations
and he's pretty engaged in policy argument.

That doesn't really come through to the American people, does it?

Yeah.

I've thought so much about age
since my book has come out
and it is something that everybody...
It's obviously based on the polling,
it's on everybody's mind
and I've had to confront it in a different way
than I did when I was reporting the book
because when I was reporting the book,
I was chronicling two years of governing

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

and the political demands
based on Biden were very different
during those two years than they are now.
So I'm just going to go through this
in the way that I've started
to untangle it in my head.
So there's a question about
Biden's mental acuity
and his governing capacity
over the course of the last two years
and where he sits at this moment in time.
In the CNN poll the other day
said that 73% of Americans
are seriously concerned
for Biden's current level of physical
and mental competence.
That's three-quarters of Americans.
That's a huge number.
There's his mental competency.
I think that he's not somebody
who's sitting there dancing on the strings
of a puppet master right now.
If anything, it's the opposite of that,
that he's somebody who kind of hurls himself
into the details of whatever
problem A is for better or for worse.
I mean, I think there's strengths and weaknesses
to that style of management,
but he has
the ability to think
through a major problem
in a way that I think does reflect
experience and the like.
So, if you were to give him
a mental acuity test of the likes
that Nikki Haley has suggested
a president should take, I would say
he would pass it.
There's the question of his physical
energy levels, which is a totally
different question,
but also central to being president
of the United States because communication

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

is a huge part
of the job, and I'd say that
his age
has made it harder for him
to be an energetic
communicator
with the American public, and so it's one of the
strange things about his presidency
is the way in which
he's omnipresent,
he gives speeches every day,
he talks every day,
and yet he seems to be
this guy who's at a
remove.

But he's had the fewest press conferences
of any president since Reagan,
and I think the only one less than that
is Nixon, and Nixon we understand
why, because he was committing
enormous amount of crimes, and
Reagan also had the issue
of mental
infirmity that people suspected had
really overtaken him in his second term.

I mean, he's out there a lot, but he's
not communicating with journalists, he
hasn't given a single interview
since his presidency to a major
American newspaper. It's very rare.

Yeah, and I think with Biden
a lot of that is tangled up
in security and in
his notorious
eternal problem of gaffing
and that...

Is it gaffing or is it lying?

Well, I think it's...

So when you say something like
Putin should be removed from
power, which was the gaff that got him in
trouble, and that's not lying,
that's probably... That's a Michael Kinsley gaff.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

Yeah, he's telling the truth.
I think that his problem
isn't the stories that
morph over time and that fact-checkers
would rightly point out to
having problems with him. The problem
that he has, or the
times that he says something
that accurately reflects
what he's thinking. I mean,
the most famous example of this being
when he went on Meet the Press and started talking about gay marriage,
and he's not
somebody who is disciplined with
message, and I think that he's
got a keen
sense of that quality
in himself, and I think he tries
to protect himself from
that. That's my... It's always been my
sense of why he's been
at such an incredible
remove. And also,
he was able to get away with it for a very
long time as a tactic, right?
So for the first
however long he's been
president, he hasn't taken
that much heat for
existing at a remove. I think only
now is it starting
to be visited on him
in a way that hurts
him with the press. To me, the
right question, and it's kind of implicit
in your analysis of the second
Reagan term, is kind of projecting
forward. And that's
hard for me to do personally, because
people age different.
People age differently,
and people...
But I think that... Just precisely what Donald Trump

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

said yesterday, by the way, to Megan Kelly, he said,
I don't think Joe Biden's too old, people age
differently. I just think he's
bad at his job.

Right. Well, I mean...

He has a reason to say that, right?

Right. But to me, that's
the real question that gets
at... If I were to ask

a question in good faith about Joe Biden's
aging, that seems to me the most poignant
version of it. Yeah.

About the stories he tells,
which I find very strange and
slightly troubling, the other day he said he
was at ground zero the day
after the September 11th attacks.

He wasn't. He said that he was
a professor, I think at the University of Pennsylvania,
teaching political theory for four years.

He wasn't.

Said something similar about his grandfather dying
in the hospital the same
day, and I can't remember one of his sons
was born, but that also wasn't true.

CNN, the other day,
no enemy of Joe Biden
wrote this list.

In 2021 and 22,
he falsely claimed to have been arrested during
the civil rights protest.

He falsely claimed to have, quote,
used to drive an 18-wheeler.

Falsely claimed to have visited the Pittsburgh
synagogue where worshipers were killed
in a 2018 mass shooting.

Falsely claimed to have visited Iraq and
Afghanistan as president. Told a false story
involving a late relative and a purple heart.

And falsely described his interactions
decades ago with late Israeli Prime
Minister, Golda Meir. There are other
ones to add to that, too.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

I mean, he frequently refers to his son
in Iraq, not dying because of
burn pits, but dying in Iraq.
At what point is that lying
and not just kind of a
gaffe?
It's clearly a tendency
that is deeply
ingrained in him, that this is not
this is not
we're citing or not
stray examples. They're part
of a pattern of the way
that he describes himself
and his role
in events and history.
And there is something
both disturbing about it on some level
and I think very
reflective of something
deep in his
psyche that this
desire to be
in the narrative and to be
at the center of the narrative and to have
a version of events that
kind of meshes with some
idealized
version of those
events.
But you're looking to call it lying.
Yes, because
it's a lying.
I think, yeah,
it's like on the surface, yes,
it is lying.
But there are different reasons why
people lie and I think that
that then needs to somehow
be wrapped into
the way in which we
morally judge them.
The pattern of lies are really

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

always about himself.
They're not about
other people and they're
self-aggrandizing. And so it's
this tendency towards self-aggrandizement
which is super connected
to
the way that he exists as
a politician and super connected
to all of these insecurities
that he has.
That's how I think about it.
There has been a lot of
talk amongst people that you wouldn't
expect it to come from David
Ignatius being the most recent one
in the last few posts that saying
we really appreciate your service.
You did a great job of freeing
us from Donald Trump but now it's time
to step down. Number one, do you think
that's the right analysis and
number two, do you think it's going to happen?
I think that there's a lot of pundit
wish casting happening on this
right now and for reasons
that are probably both genuine
but also horseracy craving
for there to be some sort of
alternative in the race.
Like I said, I'm really bad at the
prognostication and the calculation
bit of this. I always get it wrong.
But it's a voter
and a very informed voter because you know
people in the Biden orbit, do you want
him to run again? Well, that's a different
question and
you know, and I've
wrestled with it and I don't
quite know my answer
to that question. I think that
there are certain

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

attributes that he brings
as a candidate.
So let me disaggregate into
two parts. There's one, there's the
political question, is he the best
candidate for beating
Donald Trump? And then there's the second
question which is
do I think it's a good idea to have
an 86 year old president?
And on the second question, I would
much rather not have an 86 year
old president. And I think if there was
a viable alternative
to that that wasn't Donald Trump
that would be my preference.
On the political question, I think
it's always more complicated than
people assume. It's like
the Democratic Party
if there was no Joe Biden there
has all sorts of
fissures and fractures
and I don't know how they would
come exploding out
into the public view and I don't know
is the alternative Kamala Harris
is the alternative Gretchen Whitmer?
I don't think anybody
could predict that with any
great certainty. And whatever
you say about Joe Biden,
Joe Biden is somebody who's much closer
to I think the center
of American public opinion. He's got a record
to run on that I think he could
be proud of and he could explain
to people. And
again, plan beats no plan
and the crazy thing
is just how consequential this election
will be for the future
of American democracy.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

And one thing I just
have also seen a lot of
in media is the way in which
a lot of Bidenism
is being treated on a continuum
with Donald Trump and I
find it very strange. So the age
question, as
we are discussing, they're totally
reasonable, legitimate questions
to be asked of age that should be
asked about his age. But
his mental acuity issues
are different in scale
and kind than Donald Trump's
mental acuity issues.
Donald Trump, in my view,
behaves as a lunatic oftentimes.
But he's an agile lunatic.
He's an agile lunatic.
But that's different than having somebody
who sentences occasionally trail
off or doesn't like to
do things before 10 o'clock in the morning.
You need to be able to look
at the relative merits
of these two discussions, not treat them
as two sides of the same coin.
Or you take something like the Hunter Biden
question. Hunter Biden is a
total scuzzball who
did a lot of things that to me are
symptomatic of the way in which
kleptocracies try to latch on
to these vulnerable political figures.
I think Joe Biden did not behave
admirably in his dealings with Hunter Biden.
He should have been able to tell him
no, don't engage in this
business, don't exploit the Biden name.
That's a moral failing of his part.
But it's still different than
Donald Trump's moral

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

failings. And Hunter Biden's indictment is still different than the things that Donald Trump stands accused of. I think the troubling thing about the way that the campaign has evolved is from my perspective, is that this is all now totally muddy for voters. You don't mention Hunter in the book. I mean, he gets one passing mention. Why did you choose to not dig into that a little bit? You know, I was writing about the first two years of his presidency and Hunter was not a significant part of that narrative. And there weren't very many questions that were being posed of the White House as it related to Hunter Biden. And I wish I had more about Hunter Biden as an individual and as a figure. And that was something I got close to getting some interesting stuff on and then I just couldn't end up nailing down. Oh, how badly I want you to fill in some of the blanks on that one. Yeah, good luck. But I'll trust you, as a reporter, you want to have multiple sources and everything. Yeah. But it's you know, I find the Hunter Biden question to be so interesting as it relates to Joe Biden because How does it relate to Joe Biden? I mean, there's a lot of smoke. There's a lot of kind of political propaganda. There's a lot of people on the right who just see this as an opportunity to launch an impeachment

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

investigation when there's, you know,
some curious things there, but nothing I
would suspect would allow
somebody to be like, oh, we can impeach him on this. Yeah.
What about it, though, seems
curious to you and
you would like to know more about? Well,
substantively, I don't find
I know what I know, which
is what everybody knows and that doesn't seem to me
to add up to anything remotely
impeachable at this stage or
it's just there's some suggestive
so where was this failing? Where was his moral
failing? I think it was that
Hunter Biden was clearly
running a business that was
exploiting the Biden family name
and was dealing with
certain figures
that were in areas of the world that
were adjacent to
what Biden was working on
and he should have said not even adjacent
but at the exact area. Exactly
area and he should be able to say don't
you know, I understand
you've got to make a living, but
you know, this is too important for you
to be working here. It's not
to me, that's not that hard of a conversation
to have and where the Biden
story gets interesting is all
the ways in which that does then become a
complicated story for them to
conversation to have because there's
so many layers of guilt
that are built on to this.
I mean, I think of this
as a family story
as much as a political story, although
it is clearly a political story
and the way in which it's so hard for Hunter

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

for Joe Biden and Hunter Biden
for them both to know that Hunter Biden
was never the son that he loved most
and
that it was you know, Beau was
going to be the one who was going to carry the torch
for the family dynasty.
Hunter was always kind of the hatchet man
in that operation
and
the things that you
said you were reporting out but didn't get
solid enough to put in the book
all related to the emotional
parts of it and just not
substantive. Okay, so it wasn't
anything that worried you if it had turned
out to be true. No, no, no,
no, no, no, I just, I was
just interested in
I'm interested in the way that he
processes
his son.
Let's talk a little bit about
how you became quite popular
in conservative media
much to my surprise and I'm sure to your surprise
when it came to
some of the reporting on Kamala Harris
talk a little bit about
how your kind of reporting became something
that was injected
into the conservative media sphere
and people were celebrating this
and saying, see, we told you so.
I mean, your book seems to be
tough on her in some parts and not on others.
What do you make of Kamala
Harris's vice presidency?
Yeah, well, so I really
would like to thank Fox News
and New York Post and now
there's this comedy where

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

there are a lot of people who bought my book under false presences and now are giving it one star reviews on Amazon which I will take happily in exchange for the sale and there is something really there's part that I understand about the way in which right wing media operates and goes and cherry picks stuff from a book. That's totally appropriate and in its way honorable but then there's other ways in which I've seen how Jesse Waters on Fox News just makes things up. I mean, there was a story in the book about how Biden was looking at a map of Kabul during the evacuation and was looking at a parking lot and said this is a place where refugees could gather and then suddenly in the Fox News version of it it became Joe Biden actually wanted to build a parking lot in Kabul and his aides were laughing their asses off at him because he's so mentally deranged and so there's that. Okay, Kamala Harris, what's the real question about Kamala Harris because every vice president suffers for some version of what she's suffered from, which is they struggle to figure out what their role is in the White House, they have this relationship with the president where they end up on some level resenting the president for constraining them and it's kind of a hapless...

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

She seems to want to be constrained in some sense in your book. Yes.

You say that you didn't want to talk about race or gender despite the fact that informed a lot of her hiring decisions and a lot of her thought processes and said you know what put me as the liaison in the emissary to Scandinavia. I know it's comical.

I think Peggy Noonan in the Wall Street Journal compared that to Conor Roy in succession like wanting his piece of damn. I think it just doesn't make any sense. If you're Kamala Harris your identity is your identity and your ability to talk to certain parts of the Democratic Party that Joe Biden is incapable of connecting with your job description essentially writes itself yet she resisted for a long time playing that sort of role and I was told at the onset of the administration she was much more interested in trying to find a way to talk to the white working class voter and that she'd spent a lot of energy trying to direct her way and in way like of course that's she should right you should be vice president of all America etc etc etc but politically her role felt like it was kind of screamingly obvious and yet she just didn't want that role particularly as it pertained to the border well the border to be fair to her

her assignment was dealing
with the root causes of migration
and dealing with Central America it was a role
that Joe Biden had had
assigned to him by Barack Obama
and maybe there was something almost sadistic
about giving that role
to Kamala Harris given
all the politics of it all but I think
that the way that Joe Biden
thought about it and the way that Kamala Harris
thought about it initially
was that this was a foreign
policy assignment where it's actually possible
to get something done
you're going down you're dealing with very
corrupt governments in that part of the world
yet
like the prestige
of the American vice presidency
is sufficient to be able
to conduct negotiations
with these governments and
then of course
you know you have that
role yes it's going to
people are going to automatically connect it
to the border and
yet there's something so
defensive and so
ham-fisted about the way in which
she denied having any
responsibility for the border
and seemed to be
directing responsibility for it
in other directions
so I would say that the real issue with Kamala Harris
at core is just
her inability to
navigate
the politics of the job
that's been the place that she's really
to me she struggles the most

and
you get these sentences that she has
like
in the interview with Lester Holt where
she says I've been to the border
we're going to the border I can't remember
the exact phrasing
but she's like talked herself
you have not been to the border
she says I also haven't been to Europe
which is a very strange response
it is she talks herself into a cul-de-sac
and there's something about the way
that she communicates
that's not just artificial
it's just over thought
it's overcooked and it seems like
you can hear her
unfolding sentences in a way
in which
she's trying to avoid
making the mistake
and of course then
if you try to talk in that sort of way
you end up just littering your sentences with mistakes
yeah
on the border
Donald Trump took
rightfully a lot of heat for saying that
we're going to build a wall he didn't build a wall
Mexico's going to pay for it
Mexico didn't pay for the wall that he didn't build etc
the border seems to be an issue
that is looming pretty large in voters minds
at this moment
how do you rate Joe Biden's performance
on immigration
and on the border
I mean he kept of course some of Donald Trump's policies
for a little bit that remain in Mexico policy
how is he doing now
because it seems to be something that
voters are pretty annoyed about

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

yeah I mean I would think
he would get a lot of heat from the left
because if you looked at his border policy
in aggregate
it's reasonably hawkish
in the ways in which they've dealt with
asylum policy
is reasonably hawkish there are all sorts
of systemic reasons
for why there was pent up
demand to cross the border
and even
stringent enforcement at this stage
is not
enough to stop
the levels of migration that we're seeing
and Biden
is actually somebody who is
that hawkishness reflects
a political sensibility that he has
he understands
that this is a big problem for himself
it's a topic he does not
relish dealing with
in public or because he understands
that there are limits
to what policy can accomplish
and also that
it's going to put him cross ways with his own base
and people in
the middle of the country who
are about the issue
if you're trying to attract
working-class voters and becoming a populist
one of those tricky issues
is of course immigration
and the border
most voters don't care about root causes
they say there's people here
and I went to star county
the most Hispanic county
in America
it's not a big county

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

it's probably 20,000 voters there
and they swung pretty hard towards Donald Trump
99% Hispanic
and I talked to people there
that said nobody cares
it's not an issue of being Hispanic
but there's just people in my backyard
and I don't like it and something has to be done about this
and it seems to be something that neither party
has been particularly good
at getting their hands around
I wanted to ask you one thing about reporting
it's not a book with footnotes
in the sense that
you would see in a history book
mostly anonymous sources
most of these people I'd imagine
have a pretty positive view
of Joe Biden
they work for him, they want him to succeed
did you worry that
that was going to color your impression
of Joe Biden because most of the people
that you're talking to
are employees of Joe Biden
I wrestled with this
pretty hard throughout
I came to the book
this is the first book I've done
of this kind which is a form of
journalism where
if you don't manage to get
access to the people who are in the room
then you're going to have nothing
at the end of the day
and I've read every Bob Woodward
book and
I've written
a negative review of Bob Woodward
books and been
critical of
different parts of this genre
there's a lot about it

that I don't like
about it that I came to respect more
after having engaged
in this sort of project
and what you're describing
is kind of the inherent problem
which is you have to
make this bargain
essentially with the people
who are the only people available
to pull off a book like this
which is that
you're not going to attribute things to them
everything is going to be kind of murky
and yet like it's kind of
sometimes obvious where information
comes from
and there's a real trade off there
in terms of
transparency
and just being able to capture
something that is
journalistically and historically
useful and what you're describing
is also true that there is
when you sit with one group of people
and like you're getting their version
you're getting their version of events
of course that's going to influence
the way that you process things
that's very human
and you do your best to navigate through it
by applying skepticism
and like insisting on moments
where you ask yourself the type of
question that you asked me earlier
what are the ways in which you would be
which are the criticisms do you consider to be
legitimate and the other thing I should say
is probably obvious
from the contours of this conversation
I bring to the subject
my own ideological

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

policy commitments
and I think one of the reasons
why I was able to
get ultimately the access
that I had was the way that I wrote about
the campaign where I actually
was taking seriously
some of the policy proposals that they were
writing and I was
calling attention to them
in articles that I wrote for the Atlantic
and was saying you know what
he's probably going to govern in a different sort of way
and so that buys you
credibility with the people on the inside
who see like oh you're somebody
who's showing curiosity in what we're
actually saying and you're taking us
seriously when the rest of the world isn't
so that's all there
but I think that
I don't know if I would do another
book like this in the future
I enjoyed the challenge of it
I enjoyed the challenge of having to try to
impose narrative on
the chaos of events and
you make choices about what's important
and some of those choices
you get right and some of those choices
you get wrong and some of the historical
judgments that you make about what
you've witnessed are going to prove
out and others are
not because that's the nature of
writing something where you end
in the middle of the story
yeah I don't envy you
I mean Washington is obviously a
pit of vipers and you have to
adjudicate why people are telling you things
and what their motivations are and you know
how that affects their recall of certain

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

things I mean obviously
Kamala Harris
and Kamala Harris' office has said that
there are people inside the administration
that have been trying to make us look bad
and leaking stories etc so I mean this
is obviously just the way politics works
you didn't get an interview with Joe Biden
yeah I did see him
twice in private settings
with other reporters
who got invited in
to meet with him and so
there's colors the way that
I think about him
because I was able, especially
on these questions about
mental acuity for me it was
those were the moments where
I felt like I had the biggest
gut check about that
where I could sit and listen to him
tell stories
Had you not had that
would you have worried about it more
that they're not giving you access to Joe Biden
because they're worried about how
Joe Biden will be in front of somebody
writing a book about him?
Yeah I think so
there's a couple other wrinkles to this
one is I learned that he
as somebody who's been
around the block so many times
he has theories of the world and the way
the world operates and theories about media
especially that are very strong
and he really doesn't care for books
written about presidencies
and so he
I don't totally understand them
but maybe at some day
he wants to write his own memoir

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

and there's like a sense of competition
he has with other books
that exist however absurd
that line of thinking may be
but I mean I
don't understand why
he doesn't talk more
like whatever gaffs
he might make or whatever
exaggerations
he might display
it's worth
using the public to that
because
there's a lot there that the public should see
I've seen him
tell stories where you're like oh man
like enough about Jesse
Helms' funeral already
but then I've also
seen him talk about
American strategy in the Indo-Pacific
and it's actually a very sophisticated
way of looking at the world
and you can see he's got these
chess pieces in his head
and you know I think that those two parts
of Joe Biden probably have always coexisted
that there is
there's the bloviation
there's the storytelling
that can sometimes be dodgy
and then there's this other part of him
that is got this street wise
sophistication
about the world
and to me the appealing thing about him
is a literary character
and the thing that ultimately
became more appealing to me about him
about him as a political figure
is the messiness, is the humanness
and

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

if you don't expose people to that
then
the missing some of the stuff that would turn them off
but they're also missing the stuff
that might actually lead them to
admire him more or to understand
how he's running the country
I mean when you spoke to his
advisors and you spoke to many of them
did anyone telegraph that to you
or tell you directly that
you know we try to keep him away from
media and press conferences
because we don't suspect that anything
will be gained from it?
No, the way that they would describe it
and take this for what it is
like this doesn't necessarily
feel authentic
but it's that
Joe Biden has this abiding
insecurity about
not knowing what he's talking about
and it all goes back to the
Neil Kinnick story in the sense that
he was getting fed somebody else's
life story and that there's something plastic
about him
and that when he prepared
and to be clear for those who don't know that's the plagiarism allegations
in 1988 that he
took a bit of Neil Kinnick
the labor politician's life story
that's a seminal moment
in the official Joe Biden
biography when he went from being a
show horse in the parlance of Washington
to being a work horse
and I think this is
actually authentically true that there was
a moment in his life where
he got publicly shamed
and that he just decided that

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

he was going to prove everybody wrong
by digging in and so
he became a homework guy
and when he prepares now
there's like a messiness to that as well
so he'll start asking questions
in order to achieve mastery
where he'll say alright
you know you're giving me this thing about
child poverty I don't
totally understand it
can you bring in the person to help me
master this and that person comes in
and there's something there that he's like
he asks the question like I don't totally
I need to understand this can you bring the next person
in to help me master this and then
it becomes a pile up where
his schedule is completely
wrecked because
he spent all of this time
preparing for a press conference
and it's actually it's interesting at Kamala Harris
for very different reasons
much the same tendency
I mean you could argue there's probably something
about the overachieving
meritocratic ethos of the
democratic party where
appearing stupid
about policy is the most grievous sin
and
there's this tremendous overcompensation
for that if that makes sense
it does and I know we're right up against the clock here
I'm just gonna ask you one quick final question
Hunter's been
indicted there's this impeachment
stuff Zelensky's coming back to town
a lot is happening a lot has happened
in the past six months
what has happened since you turned in the draft
of the book that you just wish you could have included

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

I mean I think the hunter stuff
to me is just as somebody
who's interested in character
I think that that is something I wish I'd had
in the book I think the McCarthy
debt ceiling negotiations
is a great story and illustrates
in a way the idea that
he is this last politician
that McCarthy was somebody that
he was able to size up I think
pretty quickly and identify his weaknesses
and then had this strategy of dealing
with him where he let McCarthy
seem like he was dominating
in public while he was beating
him on substance in private
and also I think that the Ukraine
story is a story
that just keeps turning and
it's so hard one of the values
of a book if I can
if I can be self-aggrandizing
in the Joe Biden style is
that it helps look at
the bigger sweep of the narrative
and
to me Ukraine
is a story of our times and at the center
of Joe Biden's foreign policy
and its survival
is a miraculous
story and
how we end up extricating
ourselves from this war
if we end up extricating ourselves
from the war is the
end point it's the terminus of this
story in a way that I wish I was still
chronicling now
Franklin Ford
author of the last politician inside
Joe Biden's White House and the struggle

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Is Biden Too Old to Be President? Frank Foer Isn't Sure.

for America's future
thank you so much for joining us
thank you for an excellent interview
thanks for listening
if you liked this conversation
if there were parts that challenged you, angered you
or maybe something that said that made you change your mind
that's all great
share with your friends and family
and use it to provoke conversations of your own
and if you want to support honestly
you can do that at thefp.com
and become a subscriber
now Michael Moynihan, you can usually find me
at the fifth column podcast
thanks for listening
until next time
they're really gonna make me vote for Joe Biden