

## **[Transcript] The Realignment / Realignment Discussion & Ask Me Anything: Saagar and Marshall on Why Realignment Ideas Don't Spread, the Iraq War Anniversary, and More...(Supercast Exclusive)**

Marsha and Sagar here.

Welcome back to the realignment discussion slash ask me anything.

You all know how this works.

If you are a subscriber to our supercast, the primary way we pay the bills here, you can get and submit questions that we will answer on episodes like this every two weeks or so.

We also included a time of discussion upfront to give people who are not subscribers yet a bit of the more free flowing vibe we bring here and all of those great things.

So getting into it, you can subscribe at [realignment.supercast.com](https://realignment.supercast.com) to get the rest of this conversation or click the link at the top of the show notes.

So two things I wanted to get your thoughts on Sagar in the free section, one of which I'm just, I know you'll be interesting to talk about this privately.

So I did an interview with David McCormick last week.

So David McCormick was the 2022, was one of the 2022 Republican primary candidates in the state of Pennsylvania.

He was CEO of Bridgewater.

He was a undersecretary in the George W. Bush administration as a PhD, Pierre Trooper, all those big things.

He's also married to Dina Powell, who was a big person in the Trump administration.

He's thinking of running for Senate in Pennsylvania again in 2024, but he's down in the polls against Doug Mastriano, because the Pennsylvania Republican Party just enjoys going through that whole saga over again.

But there is a bit of pushback that I had a reaction to.

I'd love to hear your perspective on.

So here was the pushback.

Someone basically was like, man, yawn.

You should have Julius Krine.

You should have Oren Kass.

You should have more of these like new right economic populace on rather than the David McCormick's of the world who would say things like, I'm looking to what Milton Friedman thinks about the world and then giving like very generic principle of Republican positions and my response is on two levels.

So response number one is that a, like at the end of the day, like the realignment is a podcast that's funded by a foundation.

So like, I'm always going to probably choose speaking to someone in power over just purely doing something based on entertainment.

But two, the deeper thing that I think is actually deeply interesting is what concerns me is that it's actually like a resounding kind of like negative impact on the more new economics that you're looking at a guy like David McCormick who needs to win over populist voters who recognizes explicitly that he's outside of like the base of the Republican party in his state.

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Yet he's not going for the Oren Kass positions.

He's not reading American affairs.

He's still thinking the way he could win is just kind of talk about woke ism events in 1980s economic positions.

So from my perspective, I'm deeply curious why these new right economic ideas outside of guys like JD Vance who like once again, like very much came up in that space, so obviously he's going to be consistent talking about those things.

I'm curious why you think these ideas are not translating to generic pop generic Republicans who still say words like populist.

Well, why would he there's no political incentive for him to do that?

I mean, he's got the greatest out of all time.

He can just say Dr. Oz was a bad candidate, although I will say I think that McCormick would have lost by the same margin as Dr. Oz in the state of PA.

Remember, Oz only lost by five if you look at the swing votes that happened in Pennsylvania.

The vast majority of them were amongst people who were concerned about abortion, who are concerned about Medicare and Social Security, and then thirdly, concerned about the stop the steal.

McCormick is on the wrong side of all three of those issues.

And if anything, Oz was probably a better communicator on them than he would be.

So I'm not going to accept the cope that he would have done better.

Number two, also, that criticism is just silly for a very specific reason.

This guy literally ran one of the largest head funds in the world.

He's probably, he's may not be technically a billionaire, but he's very much up there.

And he's literally married to the lady who ran Trump's national security strategy.

So obviously that's somebody that you should talk to, like just on its face, on its merits.

If you have the opportunity, why not?

Stupid critique.

Three, as I said, his political calculus is correct.

A, as you already, as I already said, is literally a probably near-billionaire,

well indoctrinated, not even indoctrinated, probably just legitimately believes that ideology.

And he actually did almost win the primary by only attacking woke-ism.

So why would he change his position whenever he both has ideological, personal financial incentive and no political incentive?

Politics is about incentives.

People will only do whatever is politically convenient for them.

Otherwise, they just hold on to whatever they already believe.

And that's fine.

That's just how the system works.

So change the system.

Yeah, I think that's well said, especially in the sense that because I actually do think David McCormick sits down and says to himself, what would Milton Friedman do?

Yeah.

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Because he actually does that.

He works for Ray Dalio.

Did you note that in the episode?

I don't do people know who Ray Dalio is?

Like, yeah, it's just the thing is, is that if he actually believes those things that he believes, then the only reason why he would start saying, OK, I'm going to jettison that belief and adopt the perspective of Warren Cass or adopt the perspective of Julius Krine is if one or two things happen, like one, like he has a total just road to Damascus moment and changes everything that he believes, which happens like very infrequently or two, and you're getting at this.

Those policies and frameworks solve a specific problem that he's facing politically.

So my kind of supposition here, and this is why I think it's important that you both have the oran and the joyous, but also talk to normal archetypal Republican Senate candidates, is actually it's unclear right now if you're David McCormick talking about like a conservative vision of unions or talking about a different form of economics that doesn't align with Milton Friedman would actually A, win him that primary because the issue in the primary right now is he has to be David McCormick, who's up 15 points. So I say, thank you.

Yeah. He's Mastriano, despite his devastating governor governor race loss, he is still up 15 points. So unless new right economics offer a way around that, he's going to be kind of in trouble. I do think new right economics would have been useful for someone like, let's say, like Dr. Oz, who's going against Federman, where Federman is not just able to be characterised be caricatured as a typical boring Democrat. He's looking in touch with the work. And once again, these are narratives, but they still matter on the campaign trail. These are you see these in favourables. So if you're a, let's say, plutocratic Republican running against a more working class oriented Democrat, you could probably help your margins by talking about unions and workers and this, this, this and that. But it's still like a different scenario than getting out of the primary. Yeah, I think you're exactly right. And it's always just going to be a massive problem for people who are advancing this. I really don't really know what the answer is. I think the basic truth is that voters don't care about economics, except in extraordinarily small circumstances, like social security and Medicare. That said, many Republicans are still on the wrong side of that issue. But as Trump proved, you can say, I will protect social security and Medicare. And I guess to his credit, didn't do anything about it while he was in office. And then you can still offer massively unpopular tax cuts, and you can still only lose by 30, almost 30,000 votes. So, you know, I don't know what the answer is. Yeah, nice. The last question on this before we get to the other one is, I'd love for you to articulate what you think a normal upper middle class to upper class Republican Senate candidate thinks about these new right ideas. Like, do they think about them at all? Like, what's your perception like when you're in DC? No, I don't think they care. I think they probably, you know, the one they probably do think about is the one that was the most political salient, social security and Medicare. That's it. I think that's probably as deep as it gets, if that makes sense. Yeah. And that's less economics and more just, and that's less economics and more just sort of, hey, we have an older aging base, let's not burn, let's not light their governmental security program on fire because we'll get hurt for that. Yeah, I mean, no one is rewarding you

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at a town hall. Nobody is like, coming to you and being like, please take a better position on trade. You know, they're just like, what are you going to do to protect my kids from wokeness? And I mean, look, like, let's just call it what it is. Like, that's what they care about. And they care about Trump. And then they hate the left. That's it. So that's the, and that's why the woke, and that's why the position he was taking and was more aggressive on was just like the woke directional thing, which is like, that's what you're going to want to do to differentiate yourself in a Republican primary. The problem obviously though, and I think a lot of Republican Senate candidates in swing states saw this in 2022. If it's November, the general electorate that's up for grabs is just probably not voting on the woke issue in a way they might have if it were summer 2020 forever. And that's an important calculation to make. Okay, so other than quick topic that I'm sure people want to hear your thoughts on 20th anniversary Iraq war, everyone has their take. They're slinging out. Love to hear what yours is. I don't really have a take. I think it's really sad. To the extent that I have one, I think that many of the people who were involved in the war should not be involved in political punditry and or commentary today, or at the very least, if they are, should have some contrition about it. I haven't actually read a decent contrite take from some of the biggest take masters that were out there outside of very, very few Peter Beinart, few others that have done it. Most just want to pretend that it went away. I recently read a disastrous piece in the Huffington Post where they went and they interviewed not every Republican senator, but almost everyone that they could get on the record. And many of the people who voted for the war actually still justify it. And I just think that, and okay, you know, you could say they gave me false information or we believe what I at that time. But the lack of ability to reckon with the costs, both dollars, lives security wise, still really bothers me. That's, I don't know, that's a very generic take. And that that's just, but it's also just what I believe. I don't know. I don't really know what else to say. Yeah, I know. I mean, it's kind of more of a reaction question, because from my perspective, I just, it's definitely the area where given the national security circles I hang out in, it's just hardest for me to understand why people are just unable to say aside from just the entire, you do that you've done this, I've done this. We've done a lot of reading on the Iraq war. I just like really struggle like even in the moment, this is just a bad call, right? So like even in the moment, I'm like, yeah, how about we just give those inspectors more time? Or yeah, it just like that. That's what I'm trying to say. I'm trying to be as, yeah, go on. That problem, though, is that you're not factoring in the social pressure, which is that the overwhelming social media pressure at the time was not to question what the Bush administration was saying. The political world, let's also be real, they did an incredible job in silencing the American people, 60 something percent of Americans supported the Iraq war asking questions was not popular. It was no political benefit to doing it whatsoever. And then socially, the political costs that the Bush administration would extract from you inside of Washington was immense, immense. And so you put all of that together with hysteria of the post 9 11 environment. And I absolutely understand why people all voted for it and why they didn't ask questions. Now that's not saying that I forgive it because I think that real leadership is being able to stand up in that moment. And I think that actual, you know, if you think about it, many Americans had a much better sense of it than the actual lawmakers.

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So anyway, I think, as you said, it was a disastrous move. I think we're still paying the cost. I remember I read Gene Edward Smith's behind me here somewhere, the W biography, and he wrote in the intro, I know you just reread it where he said it was the worst foreign policy decision of our time or of American history. And I remember being like, man, is that is that really right? And then I actually got to speak with him once on the phone. I think he died. He died a few years ago. I asked him, I asked him, I said, why, why did you say that? I'm like, what about Vietnam? And he was like, look, Vietnam and not actually agree with him now. I was younger, younger

at the time. And he was like, look, Vietnam was an inevitability built across multiple administrations, starting with Harry Truman that snowballed into admittedly disastrous choices that Lyndon Johnson made. But Johnson did not create the dynamic of US involvement in Vietnam. And let's be real, if Kennedy had lived, we almost certainly would have had some sort of escalation. Not saying McGeorge Bundy's picking bombing targets in the National Security Council, not saying a secret bombing in Cambodia, but some US involvement in Vietnam, 100% inevitable, given the political reality of the time. I actually do believe, if Al Gore is elected, that we would not be in Iraq. And that is why it is 100% on President Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, George Tenet, Paul Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith, and the ideologues and the political decision makers who manipulated the intelligence, manipulated the Condoleezza Rice, and Colin Powell, even though he technically tried to stand up, but didn't do enough of a good job. Those individuals, it's on you. And all the substance chaos. I'm curious what you think. Yeah, no, I think my big takeaway really comes down to how we look at presidents, look at presidential candidates, and look at their ideas and who they're bringing around them, because broken record, but I'll bring up the Vivek interview. The thing that I find off-putting about Vivek's framing is he talked about how we need to focus on a vision. Unless the individual, he explicitly said that. The what, not the who. The Iraq war is the definition of a lesson of, actually, we should probably put aside vision because it's easy to have a vision, to have a take before you're in office, and then events start happening and you lose control of the chessboard or what's moving and what your enemy is doing, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, because if it's the year 2000 and we're making our presidential judgments on vision, let's say you are a more realist oriented Republican or a like peace-minded Democrat, you could say to yourself, hey, what could George Jovey Bush? He's specifically saying, unlike the Clinton administration, where you have the Yugoslavian, the Balkans campaign and the breakup of Yugoslavia, and you have Somalia and like, you know, Mogadishu, Black Hawk Down, all those disasters. George Jovey Bush, as we're going to put all of that in the past, his presidency is against nation building. It's against drift. It's about taking this peace dividend and returning the budget surplus to the American people, and he's going to be an education president. It's funny, I'm reading Robert Draper's 2007 book about George Jovey Bush, and it's really funny. Like, we have this image of George Jovey Bush as this very like, not intellectual, not particularly learned person. Actually, education policy specifically, there's a reason why No Child Left Behind was one of his first aggressive moves, because he was really, really obsessed with education policy was something he actually took a lot of lead on in Texas. Now, we could debate

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No Child Left Behind, but that was an issue that he's very centered on. So given the vision framework, we would say like, George Jovey Bush, he's going to be a restraint minded, domestically focused, get Americans ready for the 21st century candidate.

Okay, he becomes president. He does that for a few months. No Child Left Behind, the tax cuts, energy deregulation, well, then September 11th happens. And all of that is literally thrown out the window. Everything immediately switches from a position of bipartisanship, where he's doing these meetings in DC public schools of Ted Kennedy, and they're doing, of course, you know, No Child Left Behind to incredibly aggressive campaigns led by Karl Rove, obviously, in 2002, 2003, the pressure campaign you're talking about. So just total rejection of the vision framework. What I'm curious about, and this is all about people moving forward is like, A, what skill sets do you have? What abilities do you have? Are you the type of person who when you step into the Oval Office on day 90, when your plans are blown up, how are you going to react? That's a who question. That's not a vision question. And then secondly, the other question, you kind of got at this with your point around, you know, Wolfowitz and, you know, Scooter Libby, and Doug Feith, all these different people is like, who are you bringing around you? We didn't have time to ask or make this question. But the actual question that I should have asked him was, Hey, man, he's what I just want to know. You're talking about your vision. Who are you going

to appoint to be your undersecretary, your deputy undersecretary of defense, right? That's Doug Feith or Paul Wolfowitz, who is going to be your defense secretary? All those different dynamics is even within those individuals, it's just so fascinating. You know, like the story, and this is why I keep, I think that's why you and I both keep coming back to the story, because the story is both straightforward and also incredibly complicated in a way that should typically think about things. I always talk about this, but like a lot of people, especially on the like anti-interventionist right, right and left, we're talking about like military industrial complex. And it's all one big happy family. Well, that on September 10th, 2001, Donald Rumsfeld gave

a famous speech, where he declared war on the defense bureaucracy, where he already was in talks to being literally removed as secretary of defense, because he was cutting too many weapon systems and causing all this trouble. Once again, that's not a defense of Donald Rumsfeld. I think he was a terrible defense secretary, especially that September 11th moment. But you literally saw a situation where one person's vision, just ship the underlying realities of their personality, which was how hard charging he was, how aggressive he was, how intolerant of dissent he was, may have

been a good fit. If it's September 10, and we're focused on cutting down Cold War defense bloat, it becomes a disaster when it's September 12, 2001. And he's now saying, Nope, we don't need that many troops. That's ridiculous. No, I'm not going to really monitor how, you know, the Iraqi populace is governing, we're going to allow a disastrous process that has the Iraqi military disband. And this is this is another crazy thing, too. So much of George W. Bush's like vision or articulation was that I'm like a decider on the NBA president, you read the Gene Edward Smith book,

it was a horrible one, White House, like apparently, because I just reread the book,

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and I really recommend people read it. Apparently, there is never actually a moment in the White House where someone decided, Oh, by the way, we're going to span the Iraqi military. It just kind of happened. And once again, that's not defending it. It's just sort of like, that's the definition. If you're going to be the person who's the decider, who's running a process, you would hope you'd have everyone sit down and say, Hey, we're going to do this, that we're going to do that, that we're going to do this. But none of that happened. So that's just why we really need to focus on the individual and be skeptical of people who are overly obsessed with like, sound bites or specific like foofy, like vision. Yeah, well, I remember that part. And I remember why. And it was specifically because Bush considering himself the NBA president put full authority in the hands of L Paul Bremer. And then Bremer made the decision for debarthification without any input from Washington. And even though Bush and there was some consternation inside the

White House about the decision, Bush was like, I'm going to back up my guy Bremer, because that's how he conceived in his head. This isn't some shareholder shit, man. This is literally nation building. We're not talking about a division of a company on whether some, you know, a project gets greenlit or not. We're talking about whether millions of people are put out of work and screwed out of the economy. And at the same time being allowed to hold on to their weapons. Like, yeah, this, there's so much I could say about that. But you're, yeah, you're right.

I mean, my last thing before we get into the Supercast section, Tom Ricks, friend of the show, Saagar and I really enjoyed his Iraq war reporting really like was kind of the foundation, if you're in my interest and that type of stuff. The gamble fiasco and then the generals to really just about those like three books. It's basically a series about American generalship in the Iraq war. He lives in Austin. We got coffee. I asked him for his takeaway for listeners. I think this is so great. He said, there's a resonator if you saw her because like FDR and Bush or presidency study a lot. He said his single takeaway leadership level is FDR's vision of the job of the presidency during wartime was his job was to surface disagreement. Because when you're in the overall office, like when you're in like the national, there wasn't a national security council back then when you're basically in those meetings. At the end of the day, there is a natural kind of slope that moves that natural drift towards, okay, the president seems to like this idea. So I'm not going to like raise this idea. I think this is a bad idea because I want to like run with it and like he really likes George C. Marshall and George C. Marshall is just kind of like the big poo boss. I'm not going to disagree. And that's how group think happens. That's how drift happens. And that's how you wake up one day, not realizing this, this, this or that thing. The example that is once again, when we're talking about the disbanding of the Iraqi military or handing things over to L. Paul Bremer with the civilian provision authority, G. Edward Smith is interviewing people and they're like, Oh, yeah, I actually thought that was a bad idea. I just didn't say anything. So Tom Ricks's point is that George W. Bush was obsessed with just getting finding points that everyone agreed on and then highlighting those instead of what FDR did, which is said, Okay, we're all agreeing here. I'm now going to search for where this, this, this or that person disagrees surfacing the disagreement because the disagreement that's unstated is actually the most valuable part there. So I think there's a really interesting kind of vision of executive leadership during wartime that people should

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think about. Yeah, I actually think Kennedy did a good job of that as well in terms of bucking, not only during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but initially some parts on Vietnam. Yeah, the best ones are the ones who are able to look past the consensus also will very much willing to buck and and both take responsibility, but to surface dissident where Johnson was actually famously terrible at this too. I had never did not have any dissidents on Vietnam basically demanded total like delegation to his authority. And even though people privately one of my so actually, I recommend this book secrets by Daniel Ellsberg. And look, you could say whatever you want about Ellsberg, the reason that it's important to read it is the actual inside story of Daniel Ellsberg's career. And again, you could say whatever you want about Ellsberg post 1977, or 71 or whatever, post Pentagon Papers, undeniably had a fascinating insight into Vietnam policy, because he was literally there on the Gulf of Tonkin incident day, all the way up until the Pentagon Papers and played a central role in US decision making up until that time. And there's a famous scene where Robert McNamara is on the plane and he's like, this shit is not working. There's no evidence that a surge of troops in Vietnam has had any impact on the ground. And him and Ellsberg are all talking about this. He lands gets off the plane in front of press conference and just goes, we're making tremendous progress. The president's decision to send troops is turning the tide in Vietnam. And it was it's like, it's not even duplicity, you know, one day and then the other in the same hour that that discussion happened. And he never ever told Johnson his actual feelings. It was a disaster because you could say that he's a coward, but also Johnson did not welcome that. And that's what a fire. And he did fire him eventually. But that reason that's where the awkward dynamic comes in. Okay, so good to good discussion sections. Now we are getting to the supercast section. Once again, if you'd like to hear this full episode, you can go to [realignment.supercast.com](https://realignment.supercast.com) and subscribe if you submit your own questions, upload others, etc, etc, or click the link in the show notes. Okay, first question very on the nose, Trump 2024, do you think this guy has a chance? I'm not talking about the primary, but in a general election.